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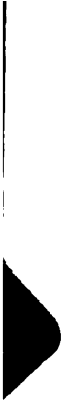
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THE SHEEP  
AND THE  
GOATS  
BY  
MARY E.  
MANN

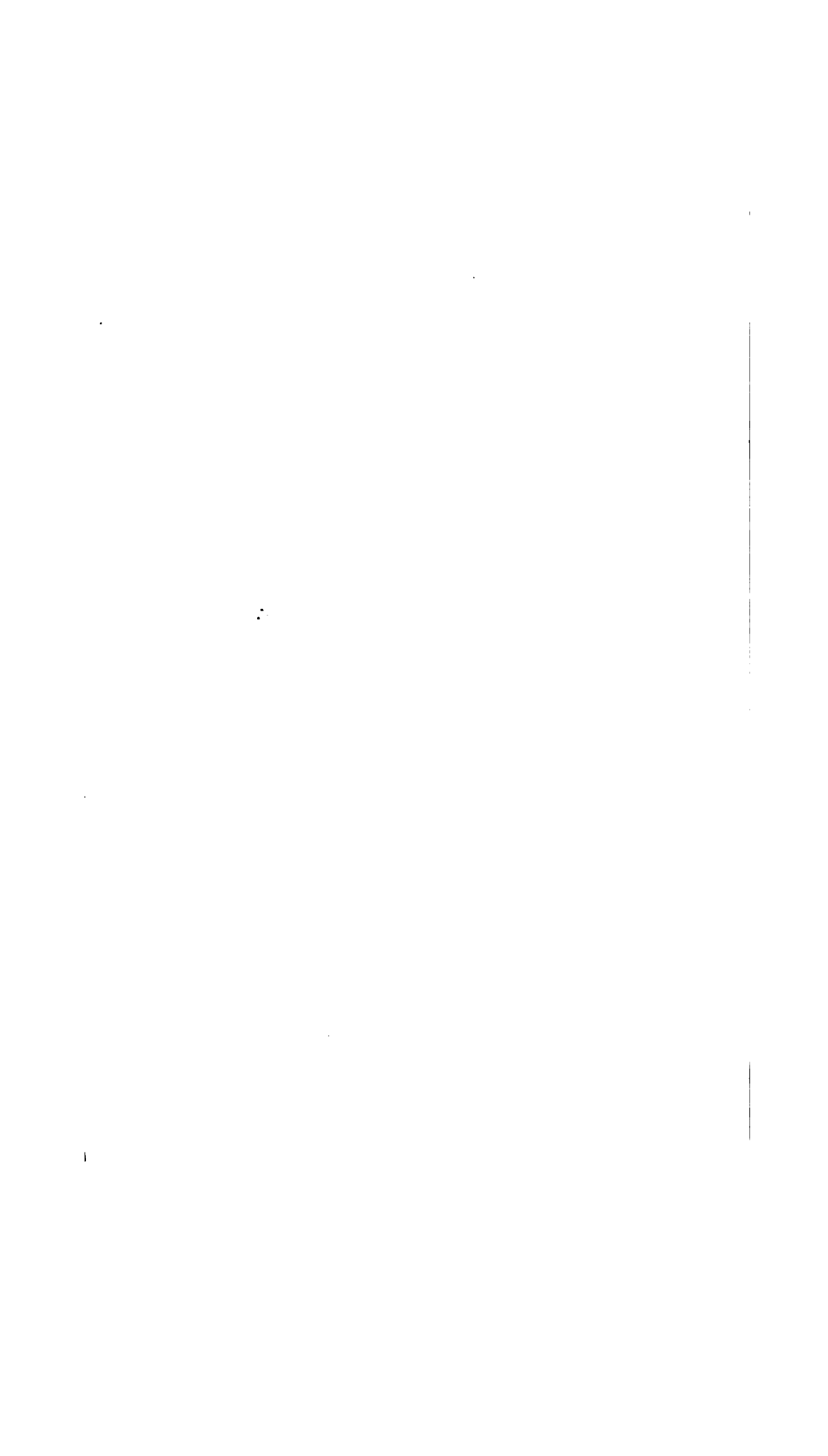


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## **THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS**





THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

**BY THE SAME AUTHOR**

**ROSE AT HONEYPOT  
THE PATTEN EXPERIMENT  
OLIVIA'S SUMMER  
A LOST ESTATE  
THE PARISH OF HILBY  
THE PARISH NURSE  
GRAN'MA'S JANE  
MRS. PETER HOWARD  
A WINTER'S TALE  
ONE ANOTHER'S BURDENS  
THERE WAS ONCE A PRINCE  
WHEN ARNOLD COMES HOME  
MOONLIGHT  
THE MATING OF A DOVE  
THE FIELDS OF DULDITCH  
AMONG THE SYRINGAS  
SUSANNAH  
THE EGLAMORE PORTRAITS  
THE MEMORIES OF RONALD LOVE**

# THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

BY  
MARY E. MANN  
AUTHOR OF "THE FATTEN EXPERIMENT"

METHUEN & CO.  
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.  
LONDON



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# THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

## CHAPTER I

### AMANDA

THE afternoon was sultry, and Amanda Chatterhouse, who had walked to a service at Saint Luke's, at one end of the long High Street of Wynborough, and back to her home, a half-mile beyond the other end, was tired.

She looked in the cool, shaded drawing-room for a figure which had been wont, of late, to take large possession of that pleasant place, seizing upon its easiest chair, lopping over either end of its sofa, squatting, with the grace inseparable from its long, limber proportions, on the floor, if that position happened to commend itself. Now the room was empty.

So was the wide garden, through which she searched in vain for the form which so frequently basked on its sunny lawns, and haunted its shady nooks.

With blank face and lagging step she came back to the house; yet must look once more in the

drawing-room, lest, perchance, hidden by some moment's freak behind piano, screen, or curtain, she might find the man she sought.

When this last hope had failed her she dragged her feet upstairs, clinging to the baluster, spent, not through physical exhaustion but the faintness of the spirit.

\*Arrived before her looking-glass she inspected her face, none the less anxiously because of that lump of disappointment heavy on her heart; with more concern, perhaps, because with its shadow of despondency upon it it was less attractive.

"I shall lose my looks; and then where am I?" Amanda asked of the glass.

She removed her becoming hat, put the two locks of brown hair which, parted above her brow, were wont to lie in large smooth ripples on either side, into "wavers,"—the heat had made them limp,—bathed face and hands lengthily in soft cold water. During the process a tiny shoot from that indestructible plant of hope revived in her heart.

To be punctual to an appointment was not a characteristic of the man she had hoped to find awaiting her. There had been a time when, whatever the hour at which she had expected him, he had anticipated it. But that was long ago—last month. Recently he had become a laggard, yet seldom failed to appear at last. He was late, but he would come.

On the spur of the thought she pulled off the walking dress in which she had gone to church and clothed herself in one of white, simple in fashion, cool, flowing. She had a large allowance of dress money, and many pretty frocks. She had chosen the

one in which, to her thinking, she looked her best. Her spirits could but rise as, having rearranged the freshly waved locks,—of a tawnier brown where they thickly framed her brow than where they coiled in a darkly shaded knot upon her neck,—she took a last look in her glass before descending.

Alas! and alas! the drawing-room was empty still.

The eager expectancy of Amanda's face faded to blankness. He was not only a loiterer—he was not coming. In order to save herself the pain of disappointment she would not hope any more.

Listlessly she walked to a chintz-covered couch, piled high with cushions, at the end of the long room; dragging the cushions to the floor, she stretched herself on her back on the cold hard surface of the couch.

She had an admirable figure; finely formed shoulders, a beautiful bust, an elegant back; she was careful when she walked not to conceal the play of her hips by long corsets, impeding her movements and altering her shape. She had been told, and saw no reason to disbelieve the statement, that several of the younger masters of the College, lodging in the High Street, kept a watch at their windows for the pleasure of seeing her walk past. She knew that in admiring the poise of her small head, the light swing of her carriage, her tall, easily upright form, they showed good sense and good taste. She admired them herself, and felt justified in her natural pride in those graces and in her perfect shape, feeling that she owed them largely to her own perseverance and good sense.

The commonplace that every woman can be

beautiful if she liked, she unhesitatingly believed. With all her heart she believed also that other commonplace, that a woman's beauty is her only weapon which counts. She made the best use, therefore, of such means for attack or defence as were at her disposal.

There was something languorous and indolent in the half-veiled glance of her slate-blue eyes, in the curve of her finely cut, slow-smiling lips. To lie among delicately hued cushions on a luxurious seat became her very well; and she often reclined in public. Alone, the cushions were hurled from beneath her, her heels brought together, her shoulders pulled in upon the hard couch. Her arms were slender and long and white, and had a habit of drooping wearily with the smallest weight—if a man were by to carry it for her; but twice a day she put them religiously through a practice with dumb-bells an athlete might have used. She fenced, she swam, she ran, she rode. In these exercises she took a certain pleasure, for their own sakes; but it was for the sake of the perfection with which she believed they endowed her body she chiefly pursued them.

She pulled her elbows in at her sides as she lay, and let her fingers lightly touch across her breast. Beneath her lashes she could see the tips of her toes turning up, ceiling-ward. She had sometimes lain in that position for hours. It was so she would lie when she was dead. She was a little sick of life, for the moment; pleased with the foolish, sentimental fancy of the idle young that she was "athirst to die." In death, at last, she would be free of disappointment, disillusion, humiliation. And who would care?

She thought of her father tramping after his ball on the Branksmead links, the sun shining upon his crimson, glistening face. Every other afternoon of his life he played golf on the links a few hundred yards from his door; he marked his recognition of the claims of the Sabbath by bicycling out seven miles for his game on the Sunday. As another concession to the calls of the Spiritual Life, he partook of his dinner on that day a couple of hours before his usual time. But he ate it with less appetite, and with an access of his habitual irritability, which did not make the meal an agreeable one to look forward to. His dinner over, he would sleep until he went to bed. If General Chatterhouse, who was a widower, had been asked, he would have declared his love and his pride in his only daughter; but in moments of depression Amanda sometimes told herself that she was of less importance in the scheme of his life than his golf-bag.

She thought of the half-dozen young men more especially agreeable to her among the many she knew; college-masters, most of them, with whom she danced and rode and flirted; the young men who were said to keep watch at their windows to see her walk by. She met them daily, and their friendship added largely to the pleasures of existence; but she could not flatter her conscience in a sober moment by the belief that should she suddenly cease to exist one of them would greatly care.

As she thus marshalled her acquaintances in dreary review, few women appeared. Women were less easy to captivate than men; Amanda had not yet thought it worth her while to strive for the admiration and love of women.



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She turned impatiently away from the contemplation of her forlorn condition. After all, what did it matter how, alive or dead, she affected anyone on earth so long as Aubrey Poole was moved in the way that she wished?

It was because there was a chance he might be among the congregation that she had attended service on that hot afternoon at St. Luke's. He had stray moods of devotion among his many moods, and had mentioned in her hearing the possibility of his going some day to hear the new preacher there. Finding him absent, the church had been empty for her ; she had come away.

She hated pain, and was not above the cowardice of telling lies to herself to purchase ease of mind ; yet she could not contrive, in that dark hour, to put from herself, altogether, the suspicion that nothing which could befall her, or any man, woman, or child upon earth, could more than touch the surface of this man's feeling.

And it was because of the insistent obtrusion on her mind of the ugly doubt that existence was hardly supportable to Amanda on that sultry afternoon.

Then the door-bell rang ; and life was a glorious possession, and earth was heaven.

In Amanda's cheeks the rose of youth and joy blushed into beauty. She turned her feet from the couch, felt the floor for the cushions, stuffed them in at her back, pushed them beneath her head, raised her fingers to the waves of hair that enclosed her brow ; then kept them there, arrested by the thought : Why had he come in such a ceremonious way ? It was not characteristic of him to ring the bell like any

ordinary visitor ; to stop on his impetuous way in order to be ushered in by a servant.

She heard a voice giving a name to the maid at the door, and the life died out from her face and the light from her eyes as she looked upon the form of the Reverend Harold Fisher entering.

"You do not object to Sunday callers, I am sure, Miss Chatterhouse?" he said as he approached her.

"*Sometimes*—I even like them," she said.

He feared she did not intend to shake hands with him, so slowly she unclasped the slim, interlaced fingers upon her lap and held them out to him.

"I thought I left you safely in church. You must absolutely have raced here through the sun. How do you do?" she asked with graceful indifference.

"How do *you* do?" he echoed.

"I? Oh, very well, I thank you, Mr. Fisher."

"So I thought," he said.

He turned away, and putting half the long room between them, sat down and regarded her with a severely earnest gaze.

"May I ask, Miss Chatterhouse, why, as you feel so very well, you left church this afternoon in the middle of service?"

"You may ask, certainly, Mr. Fisher," Miss Chatterhouse replied.

Although she did not exert herself to palliate the snub, or to break the silence that followed, she shot a whimsical glance at him as asking him not to be too greatly disconcerted. Her visitor was not only unwelcome, but had, as she considered, thrust himself upon her obtrusively, when, if the one greatly desired presence could not be with her, she wished for no

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other. Also, she did not credit him with social gifts sufficient to leaven her dispirited condition, or to compensate her for his intrusion. Still, he was a man;—and Amanda Chatterhouse emphatically “female of sex.”

As a sportsman is stirred by the sight of a partridge running across the road, or a pheasant flying heavily over a hedgerow, and, although the time to kill has not come, although the game is his neighbour's and not his own, must put himself in attitude to slay, must bring a fancied gun in pantomime to shoulder, and close a sportive eye, and pull a mimic trigger, so Amanda, in and out of season, never forgot her sporting proclivities. Although she intended no harm to him, she must never let a man forget that she was his natural enemy and that he must beware.

Gazing at her visitor presently beneath lazily drooped lids, she discovered that he was not looking at her, foolish man, as she had imagined, but that his eyes were fixed, with a moody regard, upon the carpet beyond his feet.

“I suppose you disapprove my coming out of church when I wish?—not waiting for the sermon?” she asked him.

“It is a way of frankly saying you take no interest in anything one may have to say, I suppose?”

“And doesn't ‘one’ hold it meritorious to be frank, Mr. Fisher? Are clergymen like kings, who ‘live by having lies told to them’? We all hate sermons; you know. At least, all but a few deaf old women who go to sleep. Yet, all the women in your congregation to-day—there weren't any men, were there? A church-going man is becoming as rare as the dodo

—lied to you with their rapt faces and eyes glued to the pulpit. I, alone, was honest. If you had wanted to *score*, this afternoon, you should have taken me for your text. You should have said: 'Miss Chatterhouse, in all the congregation, is the only member who is straight with me. Why don't the rest of you, instead of staring up at me and pretending to drink in my words, follow her example and go home?'

The clergyman placed an elbow upon the spread fingers of his other hand, put a thumb-nail between his teeth and thoughtfully bit it. Over his deep-set eyes his eyelids snapped quickly in a minute's silence.

"That my sermons are not arresting, that the service is irksome—these are not altogether my fault," he said.

Amanda shut her eyes; the sight of him was too fatiguing. "I daresay not," she admitted. "I don't pretend to understand about such things."

"Nor to interest yourself in them?"

"No."

She had the most disarming manner of pronouncing her little rudenesses. The negative slipped out slyly from lips that curved with a smiling wickedness; her eyes, of a dark opaque blue, shot a questioning glance at him from beneath the shielding lids.

"I wonder you are not ashamed to confess it," he said.

She pulled her cushions into position to support her back more comfortably, and laughed.

"I always knew you were dying to lecture me, Mr. Fisher. Do begin," she said.

He nursed his elbow, and bit his thumb, and said nothing.

"What do you consider my besetting sin?" she asked him.

"Levity," he replied at once, still gazing upon the carpet.

"May I retort?" she asked. "May I preach to my preacher? If so I should like to say that I consider yours is Earnestness."

He ceased to bite his thumb, clasped both his elbows and looked at her.

"You are too deadly serious, Mr. Fisher. Paralyzing."

"If I could give you a little of my earnestness!"

"Not for worlds! If, on the contrary, you could be endowed with a fragment of my levity!"

"Your knowledge of me, I regret to say, is quite superficial. Your diagnosis—flattering as it is—is all wrong."

"But about me—my levity—I suppose there is not a possibility of your having erred? You are all alike, you see——"

"The 'all' being clergymen?"

"I dislike you all very much."

"Miss Chatterhouse, will you tell me why you came out of church to-day, in that unseemly fashion, in the middle of service?"

"A friend of mine comes up usually on Sunday afternoons. Sometimes we have a game of croquet and sometimes we don't. I wanted to see if he were here."

"Wouldn't it have been better to have waited at home for your friend? Not to have gone to church at all?"

"But I went, thinking it just possible my friend might be there, Mr. Fisher."

He looked at her with unsmiling, attentive eyes, saying to himself, perhaps, how sweetly simple she was, or how simply sweet, knowing in his heart that she was neither.

"I came here to-day with an object, Miss Chatterhouse," he said.

"I dared not suppose for a moment, Mr. Fisher, that your feet were winged only with the flighty purpose of seeing me."

"I want you to help me."

"I couldn't possibly do so."

"You sing, I know, for I have heard you."

"I sing a little, certainly."

"And you dance, I have been told."

"Every woman dances, of course; but——" She stopped and laughed. A vision of David, girt with his linen ephod, dancing before the Ark of God came to her. Did he wish her to join him in religious exercise of that kind?

He told her, succinctly enough, what he required of her. He was going to engage the large room at the Salisbury Arms for one evening a week, during the autumn and winter, and was intending to give there, for the benefit of the lower orders of Wynborough, an entertainment which he hoped might prove a rival attraction to that afforded at present by hotel bars only; or the stroll in the High Street after business hours, the alternative offered at present to the soberly inclined. Would she help him by promising to sing at his concerts, and to dance occasionally with the young men out of shops and offices? Just

to prove to them that she thought well of them all, and considered them of the same race as herself?

Amanda Chatterhouse was a flippant, but not an ill-natured person; it was generally agreeable to her to do what she was asked.

"They would much better enjoy to be left to themselves," she demurred.

But the rector of St. Luke's was of a different opinion. "Why do we draw this rigid line of class and class?" he asked. "These arbitrary demarcations which are so senseless and deadening? Believe me, you will be surprised to find how charming and how intelligent some of these young people are. The mind alone should be the standard of the man, remember. 'A Christian is God Almighty's gentleman;' then, what are we, to treat such a tribe with scorn? How dare we, Miss Chatterhouse?"

She did not know, Amanda said. She opened her eyes upon the clergyman, mildly considering his question. "It would be much greater fun—not," she said. "I'll sing, of course, if you like," she promised.

He thanked her without effusion.

"And I'll bring some people——"

He stopped her there. He, himself, would choose the people.

Then he got up to go.

"Stay and have a game of croquet with me," she suggested.

He bade her good-bye without replying to the invitation. When he reached the door she stopped him.

"Now you're angry!" she said. She rose from her

cushions and followed him a few steps, and stood looking at him, in a deprecatory attitude, head prettily inclined to right shoulder, arms hanging, palms outward, at her sides, a smile of faint beseechment on her lips; and about all her person a kind of bewitching, nameless excellence. "Don't be angry with me, Mr. Fisher. I'm not worth it," she pleaded.

"Why do you suppose that I should be angry? And why do you so often speak of yourself in that tone?" He came back and stood before her. "Are you honest in doing it?" he asked her. "I am not used to women—not to women like you. I have wondered, often, if it is simply a pose of yours, or if you really have some self-knowledge which makes you speak so."

"You don't advocate confession, you know," she reminded him, with her smile. "Otherwise there is no telling what frightful revelations I might be tempted to make."

"You constantly fool me with the hope that, if only for a few moments, you would allow me to see you as you really are," he said hurriedly; "but——"

"But what, Mr. Fisher?"

The tint of his pale face deepened; he regarded her between quickly snapping eyelids, hiding and revealing, hiding and revealing points of flame darting from the dark of his deep-set eyes; then he turned on his heel and walked to the door. "It does not matter. I beg your pardon. Good-afternoon," he said, and went.



## CHAPTER II

### AT ARDEN

**I**T had been said more than once in the hearing of the Reverend Harold Fisher that Amanda Chatterhouse was not beautiful. If that was the case, what is beauty? he asked of himself as he walked away; and contemptuously he decided there could be no answer to the question.

It had been said also that she was full of affectations. This he believed to be true. She was a siren, and her wiles were not altogether mysterious. He always felt as he watched her that this and that was premeditated, meant to take effect. As far as he was concerned it was not the less effective. It was the fault of his taste, perhaps, that no artlessness of the natural woman had power to influence him like the sweet artfulness of the woman he had left.

To hear the name of the General's daughter spoken in Wynborough was to hear that she was a flirt. There was not a decently bred man in the place, married or unmarried, eligible or ineligible, that she had not been accused, at some time or other, of having run after. The clergyman, bound in some measure to believe the allegation, had a large charity in the matter. The woman had been born to please. As the sunlight fell indiscriminately shining on flower

and puddle, so Amanda's sweetness was shed. Supposing she should see fit to extend this benign influence even to him, surely he would not grumble, but be humbly grateful for his share. Not that she would be likely to show him that grace, he thought; and, for his part, he did her the justice to perceive that to carry on the business of life and Miss Chatterhouse at the same time would be impossible. She would demand, there was no doubt about it, a whole-hearted attention.

As it was, she contrived to occupy his thoughts to the exclusion of every other subject during his walk between her house, beyond one extremity of the High Street, to his father's house beyond the other. He had been under an engagement to go to tea with his father and mother between the services, but had obeyed a sudden impulse to go in the other direction. Down the gentle slope of the country road which led to the Wilderness and the golf-links; past the picturesque old gabled houses of the street, with its low, dark shops; past his own rectory, and the church of St. Luke, which at that point divides the principal street of the town into two branches, he went; on to where the town falls away again to detached cottage homes with gay gardens; to scattered villa residences of a less imposing kind than that inhabited by General Chatterhouse and his daughter; to willow-bound meadows, to the river flowing broadly beneath a low, wide bridge. And always as he went it was of Amanda that he thought.

The villas at this end of the town were mostly let to retired tradespeople of Wynborough, cherishing an affection for the town in which they had made their

money. They were pleasant, cheerful-looking houses, with spick and span gardens, and a handsome display of lace curtains tied with careful precision by various coloured sashes. Of these houses, the pleasantest to the eye, with a garden the most carefully tended, outvying the rest in the importance of its fern rockeries, putting all the other flower-crowned porches in the shade by the whiteness of its stucco, deadening the effect of the neighbouring flower-beds by the blueness of its blues, the vividness of its scarlets, the glare of its gold, was Arden, the abode of the old Fishers.

In the dining-room, where tea was spread, Harold found his mother awaiting him. A large woman, with the pale over-hanging brow and the deep-set, attentive eyes to be met with again in the parson's face. A plain woman, with the kind of ugliness that bears handsome and clever sons. She looked up from the pages of the magazine she was reading.

"Your father has been worrying us all to pack-thread because you are late, my dear," she said. "And Ursula has been, and is gone home again, because we thought you must have forgotten, and be waiting at the Rectory for your tea after all. I have just suggested your father should go after her to make sure you were there, and to set our minds at rest."

"Oh, what a piece of work!" the rector groaned. He sat down at the tea-table and crossed his arms upon it, and looked at the jam-tarts, the sausage-rolls, the jars of potted meat, with an expression of thoughtful gloom. "I wish you didn't all make such a fuss, mother."

"My dear, I am sure you hate it; but you know what your father is. I always try to get him to take you more as a matter of course. 'Do remember that Harold isn't the only person in the world,' I say to him; and often I remind him that there are other men with sons who are clergymen. It's a thing to be thankful for, I tell your father, but to keep to yourself a little; not to brag about; and——"

"Good gracious, mother!"

"Well, my dear, you know your father does brag about you. I think, sometimes, other people must be sick of your very name. Of course, I'm not. He can talk to me about you for ever. But the rest of the world don't want to hear about the exams. you passed, and the honours you took, and how much it cost to keep you at Cambridge over and above your Scholarship."

"Well, don't tell me about it!" Harold implored.

His mother was busying herself at the tea-board. "Ursula tells me you ate hardly a mouthful at dinner to-day, so I had these substantial things brought in," she said. "Now, is there anything that isn't here that you would like, my dear boy? We have a nice piece of pickled salmon, and some ham in the larder——"

"No, really, mother! In this heat we only want to eat a very little, you know."

"Well, my dear, a sausage-roll is not much. Your father says he can always find room for a sausage-roll. He eats one after he has finished his meal, as an afterthought. I made them specially for you, yesterday; and Ula has taken half a dozen home with her to tempt you between meals."

"I saw you and father at church this afternoon. All the windows were open, but I fear some of the congregation found it uncomfortably warm."

"I never thought of it," his mother said. She got up to place his cup by his side, to pass him the mustard to eat with the sausage-roll he had considerably taken. She paused beside him, with a hand pressed upon his shoulder. "Harold dear, I must tell you I think your sermon was——"

"No, you really mustn't, mother! I know you want to say you thought my sermon splendid. It wasn't, I assure you; and you are clever enough to know it wasn't if you listened with your head instead of your heart. It's very kind of you, dear," he said, and he laid a hand with a moment's pressure upon the hand on his shoulder, "but I'm not a wonderful person, by any means; and no one thinks I am, thank goodness, but you."

"It's because no one else knows," Mrs. Fisher asserted with steady conviction. "Your father counted five people asleep this afternoon—doesn't that show the kind of intellects you've got to appeal to?"

"And one went out," the clergyman said, who, whatever they said of her, liked to have people speak of Amanda.

"But that was before the sermon," his mother hastened to remind him. She watched every mouthful he ate of the sausage-roll, and possessed herself of the dish to pass to him when the last morsel should disappear. "It was only that crack-brained Amanda Chatterhouse," she said comfortingly.

The rector brought his brows together. "That

isn't a pretty term to apply to anyone, mother," he said.

Mrs. Fisher looked down; her son's disapproval was the one thing on earth she feared. She was a fairly well educated woman for her age and class; was a reader, besides, and observant. Her accent, which had been as provincial as his father's when Harold was a little boy, she had corrected by much painstaking. Her opinions she founded on those of her son. The books and papers she read were such as he recommended. He would, she knew, talk to her as he never talked to his father. If she found herself, for the moment, opposed to him in any argument she quickly confessed herself to be in the wrong.

Crack-brained? It was a familiar word in the little household, applied here and there without much discrimination. Never again would it fall from her lips!

"A lady may find the heat overpowering without being crack-brained, I suppose?" Harold asked, with knit brows.

Mrs. Fisher supposed Miss Chatterhouse, although not looking "anyways delicate," was one who easily went faint with kneeling.

"I called on her this afternoon. 'Twas that made me late, mother. I want to get her to interest herself in my Young People's Club. An attractive woman like that could make herself infinitely useful."

"Unfortunately the attractive ones have plenty to occupy them with their own affairs. You don't find many of that sort.—Ah, here comes your father!"

She sat down resignedly before the tea tray. "We shan't have another word in peace, my dear."

"He isn't there, Martha," a voice proclaimed from the little hall. "I stopped half a dozen people to ask if he'd been seen. No one could form an idea where the boy's slipped off to. The servants at the Rectory—I saw them both—said——"

But by this time the owner of the voice was in the room, and Mr. Fisher's eyes fell on Harold.

"Oh, there you are!" he said in the carefully cold tone of one not wishing to seem too glad. "I've been pelting around in the blazing sun trying to find you up, for your mother. There was no satisfying her without my going, myself, to look for you. Pouf! 'Ot, isn't it?"

He was visibly warm. He sat down and pushed the silk hat he wore back from the perspiring brow, which he mopped with his handkerchief. "My collar—what with the 'eat of church, and what with racing down to the Rectory—you might wring it!" He pulled the article in question from his long lean throat by an inserted finger, and looked reproachfully at his wife. "I should have thought starch was cheap enough. It's a little 'ard I can't 'ave my collar stiffened for the Sunday. Where'd you get to, after church?" he inquired of his son.

He had had a call to make in the opposite direction, the clergyman explained. His father looked at him, longing for greater detail; when none was forthcoming, he grunted, and, having covered two fingers with his handkerchief, carefully wiped his neck inside his limp collar and beneath his long iron-grey wisp of beard.

"Well, you did very well to-day," he presently assured his son. "I don't know that your mother and I had any reason to feel ashamed of you. I don't pretend I quite followed all you said. Out of my depth, a little. Mayn't have been the worse for that. I don't remember old Crabbe ever saying anything I couldn't follow."

Mrs. Fisher gave a scornful snort. "You always slept through the sermon, Richard!"

"That's neither here nor there," Richard said with annoyance. "I was just remarking it would have puzzled Crabbe to preach above my head. I suppose I can say so to my son without interference?"

"Say what you like, my dear, of course."

"I'm not the only one of the congregation, I suppose, that finds the new parson above them? I was talking to Limmer and Kiddle just now. They agreed 'twas an uncommonly telling sermon. Kiddle was particularly struck with the winding up."

"Poor Kiddle!" Harold said, and looked at his mother with a sparkle in his eye.

"And Mrs. Ewing, who happened to come upon us as we were discussing it, agreed with Kiddle. She liked to have something to carry away with her, she said."

"I've said, more than once, she was too mean to be honest," Mrs. Fisher commented grimly. "Ursula was talking about the garden-party, my dear," she said, turning to her son. "She is a little nervous about it, poor girl; and I don't wonder."

"And what is there to be nervous about, pray?" Fisher demanded on a note of irritation. "She's got the charmingest spot in the place to ask people to;



plenty to give them to eat and drink; and a tongue in her 'ead to talk to them. Seems to me if any girl in the town has been put into a comfortable thing 'tis Ula."

"She has not been used to entertaining," the rector explained. "She hates it, and so do I. We shall both of us be intensely miserable. But the people who have asked me to their houses must be asked to mine, I suppose. I told Ula we'd have them in one lot, and be rid of them."

"Ula'll be wanting Mother, here, to make some of her ginger-snaps and puffs and things, I expect," the father prophesied; and he promised with genial assurance that he and his wife might be reckoned on to help to pass the affair off well.

"We must wait till we're asked, Richard," his wife said; but she spoke with a proudly confident glance at her son.

"Another occasion for the mauve satin, mother," Harold reminded her, smiling.

The mauve satin had been a present from the draper to his wife on one of their wedding-days. The first anniversary that found the lady, to her husband's thinking, justified by business prosperity in clothing herself sumptuously. The dress had been a sore subject between Mr. and Mrs. Fisher ever since. It was handsome enough, and anyone might be proud to wear it; but when, as its owner always argued, could an occasion arrive for the display of such fine raiment? One such had indeed come, many a year ago, on the day when Harold had left Wynborough College. Whatever honours might still come to her son, and had already come,

the mother counted as the proudest moment of her life that in which he had come down from the Master's table, his arms laden with prizes, his mouth working with emotion. For, very kind and flattering things, in the hearing of all that fashionable assembly, had been said to the head boy of the school—the boy whose father kept the draper's shop in the middle of the High Street. And the wide semicircle of masters supporting their scholastic Head had looked on with approving eyes. And the seven hundred boys had wildly clapped and shouted; for Harold was a favourite among them. And mothers of boys who had won no prizes, and whose names were not heard on that occasion but were written proudly down in books of county families and landed gentry, had looked enviously, Mrs. Fisher had thought, at the mother in the rustling mauve satin, standing proudly up in her place to watch the approach of the lad with the pale face, the quivering lips, and the great load of books.

And, once again the mauve satin had been worn, duly re-modelled to the prevailing mode; in the Senate House at Cambridge. That too had been a proud occasion, yet not to compare with the first; because in Cambridge Mrs. Fisher was a stranger. All might notice her handsome apparel, might envy her her clever, earnest-looking son, with the deep, brooding-eyes and the locked lips; but to make the triumph complete they should have said, "This is the wife of Fisher, the draper, in Wynborough High Street. She waited behind the counter there, in her youth; her husband still walks the shop, and smirks and cringes, and bows, because customers demand

those attentions and money so is made; but this is the way he can afford to dress his wife; this is his and her son!"

It is possible that the mauve satin had affected Harold a little uncomfortably on that occasion, for at his ordination he had made the special request that it should not be worn. There had been a quarrel, in consequence, between Mr. and Mrs. Fisher, the husband insisting on his wife paying no attention to such nonsense.

"You are proud of your son, I suppose?" he had demanded. "Then, show you are. You may depend, to see there's money in the family won't do any 'arm, either with the Bishop or the boy's friends."

Harold was told of the quarrel, and he saw, without any telling, that his mother was hurt by the banning of the satin. His heart was very tender where she was concerned. All the five years of his work as curate in Manchester, the three as preacher to the P.G.E.S., lay between; but he had never forgotten that he had foiled her in her innocent pride in him, and her loving wish to do him honour. He was glad of the opportunity to make amends; to say to her—

"Mother, at Ula's garden-party and mine you can at last wear your mauve satin."

"Oh, my dear, I don't know! I've had it by me so long I expect it's out of the fashion," Mrs. Fisher said. But she smiled, and he knew that she was pleased.

"What are you going to do to amuse the folk?" Mr. Fisher asked; and Harold admitted dejectedly he had no ideas on the subject.

"I don't suppose we shall amuse them," he said. "The more wretched they are the sooner they'll go, perhaps."

Mr. Fisher looked at his wife for support; she often chided him for what she called his "nearness,"—he was sure of her approval now.

"It's your first party. It may as well be a slap-up one," he said. "Give them something to talk about, 'Arold; as far as five pound goes I don't mind putting my hand in my pocket."

But his son, with respectful gratitude, declined his offer; and his wife, annoyed perhaps by the gleam of self-approval she saw in his eyes, turned unexpectedly upon him and told him to take off his hat.

"I've been five-and-thirty years teaching you that gentlemen take off their hats indoors," she said.

"And don't I, in other folks' houses?" he angrily inquired. "I suppose I don't want to be so mighty particular before my own wife and my own son?" He turned sharply upon the latter: "I take it my 'at is no offence to you, 'Arold? If 'tis so, say so, and I'll uncover."

Harold gravely reassured him on the point. If his mother did not mind, he did not, he said; and Fisher, with a glance of triumph at his wife, pulled his chair in to the table and held out his hand for his cup of tea.

"Have as many ceremonies as you like in other folks' 'ouses, but in your own be at 'ome," he said.

When his son left, the old man followed him, his mouth full, to the flower-crowned porch, and from thence down the paved and trellised walk dividing

the brilliant flower-beds, to the garden gate. Standing there, beneath the great blooms of purple clematis growing over the arch which spanned the gate, the blue, blue sky above him, the sun in his eyes, on his long-featured face, and carefully brushed hair, and narrow iron-grey beard, he watched the receding form of his son.

Yes! Everyone who saw the young man's perfectly fitting clothes, his well-groomed aspect, his upright figure, would say: "There's our new young parson, son of old Fisher of Regent House, who sent him to College, bought him the living, made a gentleman of him!"

The clergyman walked quickly, being late; the father could not bear him to pass from his eyes. "'Arry!" he called, and the young man turned and came back. The other laid a hand, long and white, but of which the nails were not very clean, upon his arm.

"I was thinking of the flags we ran up at Regent 'Ouse, time of the Jubilee," he said. "If they'd be of any use to you for the garden-party—just to brighten things up a bit, and so on—I could easy get them for you."

When the evening service was over, and supper was over, and the incumbent of St. Luke's, sitting, pleasantly tired, and agreeably inclined to silence, smoked the pipe of soothing and refreshment by his own study window, his sister by his side, he found he had not yet done with a subject of which he would fain have heard the last word.

"What about this wretched garden-party, Harold?"

Harold uttered a protesting groan. "Don't!" he implored, and opened the book he had held closed in his hand as a sign he must not be disturbed.

"It's all very well to say 'don't!'" Ursula persisted aggrievedly,—she was older than her brother by two years, and her authority as elder interfered with her respect for sex and condition a little jarringly sometimes,—“but if the thing has to be done (and you said it had to be done, Harry) refusing to speak about it won't help.”

"They've talked me nearly to death about it already, at Arden; can't we let it be, for to-night, at any rate? My father has been suggesting flags, and——"

"I know; he can't understand. What on earth shall we do with him on the day, Harry? Mother's different; but we shall have trouble with father."

Her brother had raised his book between his face and hers; she looked at the screen with displeasure. "You may as well give over reading for a few minutes, because there's something I've got to tell you," she said, in her irritatingly persistent way. "Something you'll be pleased to hear. Mrs. Algum has been to see me this afternoon."

He moved his book aside. "I'm not particularly pleased to hear it, Ula. Why should I be?"

"Mrs. Algum is the one I thought would never come round to be civil."

"That's the sort of speech, you know, that puts my back up at once."

"I can't help it. I've got to speak, sometimes; and you've got to listen. She was interested about this garden-party."

"Who told her there was to be one?"

"Oh, I just mentioned it for the sake of something to say. I told her people had been most kind in asking you out; *some* of them, I told her, had asked me——"

"You didn't mention the fuss you'd made about going?"

"She said, as I was inexperienced, should she help me in anything? I wanted to know what I could ask her to do."

"Ask her to do nothing."

"That's all very well, Harry; but somebody will have to arrange it. And if Mrs. Algum does not know how things ought to be done, who does know? She says she has helped lots of young beginners. What I think is, if we must have a party we may as well have it a success."

"Well, then, do as you like; only, to-night I won't be bothered."

"There'll be about fifty people. I've made out the list. I want you to look at it, Harry."

But Harold held his book firmly before his face and would not again remove his eyes from its pages.

## CHAPTER III

### THE SHEEP AND THE GOATS

MRS. ALGUM perused the list; her eyes glittered with satisfaction as they moved from name to name. Right again! At least a score of them absolutely inadmissible! It was just what she had expected.

"You must cross these out; and these; and these," she said, and ran her pencil through the offending titles.

Some of them belonged to people to whom Ursula had looked up from her childhood. "But Harold and I have been to their houses. Why? Why?" she asked.

The reason was so obvious Mrs. Algum considered it superfluous to explain. "We must have a second list, Miss Fisher, and ask all these people the next week," she said. She smirked at Ursula with hard eyes. She had black hair, and regular features, and a red face. Her husband, and one or two indiscriminating people besides, thought her handsome; she firmly believed herself to be so, and took care, at any rate, to be handsomely dressed. She was the person, perhaps, the most disliked in Wynborough, but naturally suffered nothing from a fact of which she was sublimely unconscious. She had a stupidity,



an impudence, a self-satisfaction which carried her through everything, and rendered her at once a social terror and a social success.

"But my brother will not care to give another party," Ursula objected.

"Then, do not give another. These people," indicating the deleted names, "will know what it means very well."

"What will it mean?" Ursula asked. She was so little versed in society's laws that she felt compelled to put the question which Mrs. Algum characterised to herself as "underbred." "It is my brother's wish to be on friendly terms with all his parishioners, Mrs. Algum."

"Be friendly with them—yes, of course," Mrs. Algum permitted. "You can go to their houses, let them come here on days when you are at home to the parishioners. These people are worthy, oh dear, yes; my husband and I recognise them in the street, bow when we encounter, even shake hands. We do not, however, expect to meet them socially. You understand, Miss Fisher?"

"I understand," Ursula said.

She thought of a certain young man, a clerk in the County Bank of which his father was manager. She had known him for several years as a bowing acquaintance, but only since she had come to live with her brother at St. Luke's Rectory had she been received on visiting terms by his mother. The Wings' name had been among those ruthlessly erased.

"Your brother has his position to maintain, remember," Mrs. Algum insisted. Her glassy black eyes looked down from her superior height upon the

insignificant figure of the parson's sister. Ursula felt that in the sight of the leader of Wynborough society she was contemptible.

"My brother is the last to care about his position in that sense," she compelled herself to say, uncomfortably flushing.

"But he owes it to his brother-clergy and to the Set in which he now finds himself to care," Mrs. Algem placidly persisted. "I do not think you will find him demur. If he does, tell him from me there must be the sheep and the goats." She paused upon the metaphor, looking at Ursula with the beady eyes, pulling in the already sufficiently retreating chin, setting the fine shoulders back. "We have the highest authority for that, have we not?" she asked.

The argument was unanswerable, or, at any rate, Ursula did not answer it. She sat, subdued and apparently submissive, at the Algem feet, while that unhesitating lady made out the new list. She was good enough to add several names of people she thought it desirable to have at the garden-party in place of those she took away.

"Anything else you like to ask me about, pray do," she said as she went away. "I will come early on the day and help you to receive your guests."

"You are very kind," Ursula said falteringly, "—but there is of course my mother, who will help."

Mrs. Algem had nearly reached the door on her way out; she stopped, half turned to Ursula, but did not at once speak. The situation, as she afterwards explained at a dozen teas and "At Homes,"

was difficult—painfully difficult. Yet this intrepid lady had never known her tact and her courage to fail; they did not abandon her now.

"Your mother?" she repeated with suave deliberateness of enunciation. "At the garden-party? I think not, Miss Fisher. I think on this occasion it will be better for you to look upon me as your mother."

And so, with a tiny handshake, with a rustling of her silken undergarments, with the hard smirk in Ursula's abashed face, Mrs. Algum departed.

"What!" the rector said when his sister explained to him the outcome of Mrs. Algum's kind intervention. "Put herself in our mother's place! Put down the names of her own friends in place of mine! And you allowed her to suppose we should submit to such impertinence?"

Ursula was aggrieved. "It's all very well for you," she said; "you weren't there. She has such a way of saying things, as if there couldn't possibly be a question about them. You feel ashamed of not knowing as well as she does; you feel like the dirt beneath her feet. It is quite impossible to argue or to gainsay."

"All the same, you will go to Mrs. Algum this afternoon, and tell her we will manage our own affairs. Be civil, of course. Say we appreciate her kindness, and so on, but that we prefer to muddle through ourselves. Don't let the grass grow under your feet. Go at once."

"I won't," Ursula said, putting on her mulish look.

It was the rector himself, in the end, who undertook the unpleasant task.

"It will be a pity to set Mrs. Algum against us, to begin with," his sister reminded him.

"Why need she be against us, or for us, or anything to us?" Harold asked. "I wish to live on good terms with my neighbours, of course; but beyond that, why need I trouble about this woman?"

"She does take the lead in the place," Ursula urged.

"Do I care?"

"She thinks this wretched garden-party of importance. She says it will be launching you and me."

"She is an impertinent woman."

"She is right, to an extent," Ursula said dispassionately. "Harry, I know you will hate to hear me say this, but I want to say it, once for all. Because our father kept a linen-draper's shop in the place there are people who won't be friends with us; and there are others who expect to be,—father's and mother's friends, not refined people at all; some not even educated. To know them would give you no pleasure. To ask them to your house would be to offend the other people—the people with whom you are now equal, who should be your friends. I don't want to seem a horrible snob, but——"

"But at the present moment, my dear Ula, I am sorry to say you do."

"It isn't my fault. It isn't anyone's fault. I hate it all; but I can see that she is right. Since you were a boy you have not lived here, Harry; you know nothing about it."

"Because I have not lived here is the reason I do know."

"Other sorts of knowledge. Not this. Look at me. I am as well educated, as refined, perhaps, as Mrs. Algum herself. Until you took me to keep your house not one of these people would look at me. Now, one or two have held out their hands——"

"One or two of those this woman says we are not to receive in our house?"

"Yes. The others will know you, alone,—not me. I'm not a bit annoyed, Harry. I knew all along how it would have to be. People can't help it. They're in Sets, you see, and they *can't* get out. There's the County Set, and the College Set, and the Professional Set, and—oh, don't let's talk about it! But I can't help saying that I do think father will be a little trying at the garden-party."

"That is because you are a snob, my dear," he said.

His interview with Mrs. Algum did not occupy five minutes. As he climbed the steep slope of her large and well-ordered garden, towards the handsome erection of clean red brick and dazzling stucco which she called "home," he descried the lady of Westfields pacing the terrace. She walked with stately steps; her black hair and black eyes, and the sheeny surface of her plum-coloured summer dress, shone in the sunshine. She smiled upon the young clergyman ascending the green acclivity, winding between the enamelling flower-beds.

"You sent me some message about the sheep and the goats, Mrs. Algum," he began at once as they encountered. "It concerned the subject of our projected garden-party which my sister seems to have mentioned to you——"

"She and I were looking over the list of guests, Mr. Fisher. I saw at once that it must be revised; and——"

"Ursula told me. I think, Mrs. Algum, with many thanks to you for your kind offer to assist us, in this little matter it will be better for us to be left to our own blundering."

Mrs. Algum was rendered for the moment speechless. There was a hard glitter in the eyes which regarded the draper's son.

"In our ignorance of much that under your guidance we should learn we shall doubtless go astray," he went on. "But having tumbled into pit-falls we shall perhaps scramble out again; and all experience is of value."

"As you like, of course," Mrs. Algum said; she pulled her lips tightly back from her teeth in a contortion which did duty for a smile. Her tone might have warned the clergyman that henceforth enmity reigned between him and her. He did perceive that she was very angry, but then so was he, and met the glassy stare of her fine orbs unabashed. Could he have known that as she spoke she formed the dark design of refusing to the incumbent of St. Luke's and his low-born sister all the social benefits she had had it in her mind to bestow on them, he would have been equally indifferent.

But Mrs. Algum could not conceive of such apathy; she could only remember what was in her power, and marvel at the daring of the young man's deportment. She said a frigid word or two to him on the beauty of the day, and agreed with him with a stately condescension when he remarked that her garden

was dazzling. He could not find a pleasanter word for the scene; the glare of the geranium and calceolaria borders, of the emerald green terraces, of Mrs. Algum's sheeny dress and glittering gaze, hurt his eyes.

At one of the shining windows in the great building behind them—one of the most important Houses for the accommodation of College boys in Wynborough—the goat-like countenance of Mr. Algum appeared.

"Coming, love," his spouse called to him, although he had not perceivably demanded her attendance. With a slight inclination of her haughty head to her visitor she turned her back upon him, and with her stateliest gait moved away.

As Harold Fisher left Westfields and made his way along the London Road, where several of the "Houses" in connection with the College were situated, but where were none quite so imposing and magnificent as the Algum abode, he declined more than one invitation from ladies he met to go in to tea with them. One, more alert than the rest, came, at full trot, down the steep slope of her garden to capture him. She was at that moment drinking tea in her loggia, the coolest, shadiest spot in the whole glaring place; five ladies were with her, and they were all so tired of each other's society, he simply *must* come and enliven them!

But he would not.

A cyclist, five daughters cycling around her, racquets and tennis shoes strapped to their machines, sprang to earth and commanded him to appear at their party to-morrow afternoon. He had already refused by post, but they would take no refusal.

They had asked every single master in the College and all had declined, they assured him, save Aubrey Poole, who accepted every invitation and never went anywhere.

"They're all so superior, and so frightfully afraid of being bored," the youngest girl said. "But we can't possibly have a party without one man present. And you aren't superior, Mr. Fisher; at least, I shouldn't think you are; and clergymen never mind how much they're bored. So you simply *must* come."

This snare also he managed to escape.

"It is all very kind and friendly," he said to himself as he walked on, "but——"

But the thing these idle women wanted to make of him he despised. He would not be the plaything of their coteries, the recognised cup-bearer at their tea-parties, the follower, now tolerated, now encouraged, now laughed at and slighted, as the maggot bit, at the heels of caprice. His work among the mill-hands of Manchester, and later as preacher to the P.G.E.S., had not given him, perhaps, the best preparation for his present duties of parish priest. A good preacher he was, a good organiser, a hard worker; but not a man to make visits of half professional ceremony, to supply chatter for chatter-loving ears.

When badgered into accepting a hospitality he would have avoided he was aware that the impression he created was by no means satisfactory. The tongue that was so eloquent in the church, so glib at addresses and speech-making, was idle where others wagged; for the reason, not accepted in society, that he had nothing to say there.



Yet, in spite of his silence, his glumness, his indifference; in spite of the shock it was to refined feelings to see the son of the Wynborough draper filling the sacred place of "dear old Mr. Crabbe," who had been "connected," and had had the most charmingly dignified manners, the new young rector was kindly received, and could easily have found himself the popular idol if he had liked.

He had a reputation for cleverness, he was young, he was unmarried. There was attraction in the dark paleness of his face, in the rugged but refined features, in the sleek, well-shaped black head, in the deep setting of his eyes. His determined reserve in social circles, his inability to differentiate set and set, his unfortunate habit of dragging forward, when he was made to talk, names of people "not known," were gaucheries which proclaimed, perhaps, his bourgeois origin; but these defects, by association with "the right people," would disappear.

In short Wynborough, knowing that in accepting its new rector there had been much to swallow, had made the gulp with a good grace, and was highly pleased with itself in consequence, and well affected towards the low-born parson.

## CHAPTER IV

### "MY DAISY"

REACHING the High Street, at whose lower extremity, as has been said, St. Luke's, the Rectory opposite its north door, was situated, Harold, looking down the sunlit pavement, saw a figure he knew—a figure moving, in white dress and beneath white umbrella, queenlike, it seemed to him, among the other insignificant fellow-men and women of the way—and went to meet her.

They encountered at a spot where Miss Chatterhouse was content to stop to talk, agreeably aware that from a certain second storey window, set deep in the creeper-covered house by which they stood, certain admiring eyes might be on the watch. While she smiled languidly upon the rector, her own eyes of slate-coloured blue, glinting in the sunlight beneath the heavily shadowing lids, looked from their corners, now and again, inquiringly at Jasmine House. Beneath its roof Aubrey Poole and several of the younger masters of the College lodged.

"Miss Chatterhouse," the clergyman said, "Ursula and I are going to give a garden-party. Will you and the General come to it?"

"Of course we will," Amanda promised. "When is it?"

"That is for you to say. It is to meet my father and mother, Miss Chatterhouse."

"Delightful!" Amanda said.

Her eyes opened more fully upon him. The young man had been much pitied for the possession of that father and mother, and it had been tacitly accepted among the more important of his parishioners that these worthy people must be, as far as possible, ignored. Mrs. Algum, that person of extraordinary tact and infallible judgment, had suggested even, that it would be in better taste for people, while in the clergyman's society, not to allude in any way to their own parentage. Miss Chatterhouse, who was courageous herself, and admired courage, said the word "Delightful!" with a ring of sincerity; but she was very much surprised.

"I thought, perhaps, you would name a day which was convenient to you and General Chatterhouse; and I would ask the rest," the rector said.

Amanda named a day; said a word about the sunshine, which was bringing out for her companion's advantage the latent gold in the brown of her hair; asked if he was going up to see the cricket-match which the boys were playing that afternoon; and passed on.

"Mrs. Meers is wanting to speak to you, I think," she said as she went.

Her quick eyes, in keeping their watch upon Jasmine House, had noticed the movements of its mistress, who, having first observed the figure of the rector from a window on the street level, had then appeared at the door. She bowed and gave a deprecating smile as the young man looked round.

"Might I trouble you to walk in, sir? I won't detain you for many minutes," she said.

She led him into the dark, somewhat airless room at the back of the house, which was her sitting-room; and her daughter Daisy rose from the piano upon which she was heavily strumming.

"Yes, go!" her mother addressed her as the girl brushed past. "I told you I should ask the advice of the clergyman of the parish about you; and so I am a-going to do it."

But that he remembered to have heard his own mother say that Mrs. Meers in her youth had also been a good-looking girl, regarding her fat and flabby face, scant hair, and watery blue eyes, the rector might have wondered what brought her possessed of such a lovely daughter. For to Daisy Meers, now in her seventeenth year, without hesitation or quibble, the epithet "lovely" must be applied. It might have puzzled the critical person, passing under review her physical charms, to name one detail, even, in which she might have been improved.

"You must excuse my Daisy, sir," Mrs. Meers began as the door closed with a bang upon that young lady, "and you must excuse me for troubling of you; but the fact is, out of all my five children she is, as you may have heard, sir, the only one left to me; and such being the case, you, having a tender mother of your own, can guess at my feelings."

"Is there anything I can do for you?" the rector asked.

"It's about my girl—my Daisy," the woman began again. "Her having no father or brothers living to have an eye to her, and me having my hands full with the

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cares of gentlemen-lodgers, and not having eyes all round my head to be aware of them; and Daisy being young, and as you see her as to looks; and——”

The rector considered the lodging-house keeper with his attentive eyes as she floundered on through matter relevant and irrelevant, making no comment, not helping her with a word, gathering her meaning from his own intuition rather than her discursiveness.

“You mean you begin to feel the awkwardness of having such a very pretty girl as your daughter in a house full of young men?” he said at length.

Mrs. Meers regarded him with a face of grateful admiration. She had not quite known herself what it was that she had meant, but she looked at the matter in its now defined form and saw it was to that it amounted.

“That is so, sir,” she said. “Of course, in the strictest confidence. I don’t wish to murmur, or to make complaint against gentlemen that are gentlemen, every inch of them. In so doing I should be taking the very bread out of my mouth, and Daisy’s mouth; and so I tell her. I’ve talked to her, and talked to her! Not that I know what Daisy should do. She being as God made her, Mr. Fisher, for looks; and as modest as modest. Get her to drink so much as a cup of tea with any of the gentlemen in their rooms, you couldn’t!”

“But there she is, and there they are,” Harold interrupted. “I quite understand. You must send her away, Mrs. Meers.”

But Mrs. Meers received that sound piece of advice with tears. “’Twould be like tearing the heart out of

my body with my own hands, sir. Me left with only her!"

"But mothers do that every day, Mrs. Meers. They consider their children, not themselves. Besides, don't you intend to give the girl some career? She has left school, hasn't she?"

"Yes, sir. I was hoping to get her a place as governess in a Wynborough family, Mr. Fisher; so as I don't need to part from her. And that's how I came to make up my mind to speak to you, sir; thinking, there being a connection between us—if you'll excuse my mentioning it—you might take an interest, and look about you for something suitable."

"A connection?" the clergyman repeated.

"No offence my mentioning it, I hope, Mr. Fisher," the meek woman said. "Mr. Meers and your mother was first cousins, you may have heard."

Perhaps he had heard. But there had never been intercourse between the prosperous family at Regent House and the family of Thomas Meers, the broken-down, idle tailor, who had drunk himself to death long ago, when Harold had been a boy. The fact of the relationship, if he had ever known it, had slipped his memory.

There was nothing in the appearance, history, or circumstances of the lodging-house keeper to make any man anxious to claim kin with her; but it happened that the ties of family were held in great respect by the rector of St. Luke's; and he was one to reject no responsibility lightly.

"You may be sure I will do my best to help you in the matter of placing your daughter," he promised. "In the meantime it will be better for you to send

her to stay with some friends who will look after her."

Mrs. Meers helplessly shook her head. "The only friends we've got Daisy won't go to, sir. I've asked her, and they've asked her, and she've said, point blank, no."

"There is some strong attraction which keeps her here?"

He noticed the lurking smile at the corners of the mother's weak mouth. "I don't know 'tis as much as that—on Daisy's side," she said, shifting her eyes from his face. "But human nature is human nature, as we all know, Mr. Fisher; and she certainly do receive the most beautiful presents."

"You must take them from her and give them back."

"No chance of that, sir. All anonymous, and just laid in Daisy's room."

"But you know, of course?"

"No, Mr. Fisher; begging your pardon."

"You have your suspicions?"

Again the half-cunning smile of pride in her daughter's love-affairs. "I hope I'm the last to harbour suspicions of any gentleman; least of all them under my own roof," she said, looking down.

The rector got up. "I see. If at any time you should be compelled to harbour them, don't tell me of them, Mrs. Meers."

As, having reiterated his promise to do what he could, and taken his leave, he passed through the hall, he perceived the beauteous Daisy lingering there. She had been listening at the door, perhaps; or perhaps simply waiting to speak to him.

She was a well-grown girl of her age, but she wore

a frock which hardly reached to her ankles, and over it an all-enveloping, loose white muslin pinafore. Her hanging, rich-coloured hair, parted in the middle, fell, crisply curling, on each side of her pink, angelic face. She looked an overgrown child, and a good as well as a lovely one, he thought. She held a book in one hand.

"Are you fond of reading?" he asked her.

"Some sorts."

He looked at the title of the book, a beautifully bound copy of *In Memoriam*. One of the anonymous gifts deposited with so much delicacy in her room, he decided.

"Do you like this?"

"No. It didn't seem to have hardly any meaning," she volunteered.

She liked story books better? he supposed.

Yes. If they weren't silly. She didn't care for silly ones.

She must belong to his lending library, he told her; he or his sister would choose the books for her. Would she like to belong?

She didn't care, she said. She would if he liked.

"She is a brainless, beautiful creature, who if left with her ignorant mother will come to grief," he said to himself as he walked away.

While the matter was fresh in his mind he carried it to his mother.

To begin with, was it true that the defunct Meers, once tailor in the High Street, had been her cousin?

Mrs. Fisher eagerly repudiated the relationship. "He was cousin to my mother. No relation, whatever, to me, Harold."



"Cousin once removed. It does constitute relationship," the rector inflexibly corrected.

"We never had anything to do with him," she hastily declared. "Your father and I decided long ago to keep him and his foolish, extravagant wife at arm's length. When he died and left his wife and child to starve, a subscription was got up to put her into Jasmine House as a means to get a living. I gave ten pounds out of my own money, unbeknown to your father. And that was more than Alice Meers had any right to expect from me."

"She seems a rather helpless being."

"No worse than she always was. She gets a living now; and does very well."

"The girl is really lovely."

"So they tell me. I'm no judge of such things. I know she's always tearing about, up and down the street, when she would be better at home sweeping the floors. They're dirty enough if they're left to Alice Meers to keep clean! Her picture, if you please, is stuck up at the new photographer's in the High Street for all the College boys to stand and stare at. Putting such notions into the girl's head! If I'd been as foolish as that with Ula I wonder where Ula'd have been!"

"Ula isn't a quarter so pretty."

"I shouldn't be so foolish as to take a brother's account of a girl's looks!"

"No! Always go to her mother! Mrs. Meers wants to find a situation for her Daisy."

"The sooner the better."

"I quite agree."

"In the meantime, dress her up like a great doll,

with her pinafores, and her tammy stuck anyhow on her head, and set her to run in and out of the chemist's, or the grocer's, or the post-office—wherever there's young men to look at her ; or trail her up and down the High Street with a pack of the College boys at her heels ! Her mother's mighty particular to get her taken care of, all of a sudden ! She'd better have begun earlier, I think."

The rector thought so too. "You don't feel disposed to do anything for her, mother ?"

Mrs. Fisher opened upon him eyes of surprised alarm. "Do anything?" she repeated. "Most certainly not, my dear. Not a ha'penny more than I have done. My ten pounds was more than they'd any right to expect of me ; and if your father knew it——"

"You wouldn't let her come here to stay, for instance, while I find a suitable situation for her ? You see the mother evidently has fears about the girl ; and——"

"I'll see her, and her mother, and you too, Harry, at Jericho before I'll do it !" Mrs. Fisher cried, surprised into forcible rejection.

She altered her tone, however, in the course of a few hours. For Ursula came hurriedly in with the intelligence that Harold had commanded her to go to Jasmine House to bring back, to stay at the Rectory, the lodging-house keeper's child.

"It's Harold's latest !" Ursula said with an excited and irritable air. She had a pale, solid-featured face like her mother's, with her father's long sharp nose. It always grew pink at the tip in any agitation ; it was pink now.

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"He mustn't do it," the mother said anxiously. "It would be an altogether wrong step; he——"

"Mustn't!" Ursula repeated. "You've forgotten what Harold's like, mother, if you think anyone can say 'mustn't' to him."

"But in his position it would be such madness! Why, even us—your father and I——"

"There you are! 'Position'—that's the red rag to a bull with Harold. Whatever argument you bring to bear, don't make the mistake of using that one. Oh, dear, we never can speak in peace! Here's father, now."

Mr. Fisher, who had been busily employed in pulling the garden-roller over his gravel paths, already as hard as iron, now appeared at the open window. His womenkind were so unhinged by the gravity of the situation, that they were betrayed into giving him the subject of their conversation instead of putting him off with subterfuges as was their custom.

"What!" he cried. "Who? Who? To live with Harold! *Who?*"

When he understood he came near to dance a fandango of fury on the flower-bed outside the dining-room window.

"That tailor's daughter!" (having recently retired from his shop he had developed a hearty contempt for people in trade). "That fuzzly-headed brat!"

He turned fiercely away from the window and came in to his wife and daughter, pulled off his gardening gloves, flung them on the table; sat down in a chair against the wall; looked in angry bewilderment from one face to the other.

"To help in the kitchen, then, I suppose?" but he knew very well this was not intended. "Did I put Harold into the position he occupies, did I furnish his Rectory in the latest, for tipsy Tom Meers' draggle-tailed daughter to flop about in? I swear I didn't. I'll go to the Bishop first."

He had very broad notions of the powers of this prelate. Over an obstinacy of Harold's on the subject of his dining-room chairs his father had mentioned his intention of protesting to the Bishop.

"Harold has not given what he is doing a proper thought," Mrs. Fisher said soothingly.

"Harold's a fool—that's what he is. We may as well make up our minds to it. I raised him to where he is, to show folk what he's got in 'im, not to make 'imself cheap with the *truck* of the place."

"That sort of consideration doesn't hold weight with Harold for a minute," Ursula said, who was always on her brother's side directly anyone was against him. "He doesn't look at things in your way, father."

"Because he's a fool and I'm not," Mr. Fisher declared. "If I'd been a fool I wonder where he'd have been? Where would you have got your seventy pound a year education from? Where——?"

"Oh, what's that got to do with it?" Ursula asked, who never showed the outward consideration to her father that he received from his son. She turned to her mother. "Picture us—Harold and me, that have been so comfortable together—sitting up with this ill-brought-up, common girl!" she said. "Picture that tam-o'-shanter coming out of the Rectory door; and all that hair; and the pinafore——"

"It shall not be," Mrs. Fisher said. "There is only one thing to be done. Harold asked me if I would take her here, and I said I would not——"

"No! and lucky for you! Lucky you'd the sense to say it!"

"But rather than have this happen I will. She shall come here!"

And so, in the end, but not without much further discussion, disputing, angry to-do, it was arranged.

The proud Mrs. Meers, knowing nothing of the greater honour she had missed, communicated to the gentlemen-lodgers the interesting fact of "my Daisy" having gone to stay with her relations, Mr. and Mrs. Fisher of Arden. The Reverend Harold Fisher had feared that the life of the lodging-house was not beneficial to the young lady, she explained.

## CHAPTER V

### THE ASSIDUOUS MRS. ALGUM

"I CAN'T do anything so ridiculous," Ursula demurred. "I can't put in the invitations 'to meet my father and mother.' There isn't room for it on the cards, and I'm sure it wouldn't do. Besides, they'll find out, fast enough, father and mother are here when they come. It's bad taste, Harold, to make such a fuss about it."

In this matter, therefore, the Reverend Harold allowed himself to be over-ruled, and a fair proportion of the invited wrote to accept: those who wisely decided that, whatever his birth, it was convenient to keep on terms with the parish clergyman; those who wanted to go and see "what it would be like"; those who went because the others were going.

The heart of old Fisher swelled with pride when the notes of acceptance, which Ursula sent at once to her mother, were shown him. He had been hat in hand to these people all his life, getting no farther than their door-mats in intimacy; going, bareheaded, through sun and rain to their carriages, bending the obsequious back when they condescended to address him. He should see them now on terms of equality with his son; nay, looking up to him, treating him

with admiring respect, envying him his position and his dining-room chairs.

He went frequently, in these days, to the chemist's, who was a crony of his, in whose shop he liked to sit for hours, watching the customers in and out of Regent House, across the way, talking, talking, talking of his son. Many a confidence he made to Mr. Kiddle about the Rectory garden-party. How nothing would suit Harold but that he himself must be present, although he would far rather be at home, looking after his garden and getting his meat-tea, nice and comfortable, with Mrs. Fisher. How that lady had been overhauling her mauve satin for the occasion; he being of opinion, for his part, it was well enough, but the women, who were never content, having decided to send it to Regent House for the new fashion in sleeves. How, although you might have thought the young people, at least, of the party might in such weather have sat on the grass, chairs were to be supplied to all; he himself, at his son's request, having undertaken this part of the preparations and hired them of Daly.

The chemist affably listened, sealing his little parcels, his pen'orths of cold cream and two ounce bottles of spirit of camphor; but he heard other gossip in his shop besides that of old Fisher, and could have told a thing or two about the Rectory party that would have been news even to the rector's father. He knew, for one thing, that the fact of the proposed presence of his parents on the occasion was like to affect the numbers at the gathering in a manner the ex-draper did not dream.

For Miss Chatterhouse, who was too socially inclined

to keep a good joke or an interesting item of information to herself, had told the little story, within five minutes of parting from Harold Fisher in the High Street, to Aubrey Poole.

"Such a joke, Aubrey!" she had said, and told him.

He was so easily bored, she knew; of so many she had seen him tire; it was a nightmare to her that her turn for boring him might come. She took care to be always bright in his company, storing up things to say to him which should arrest and amuse him, collecting little histories to tell.

"I say!" he ejaculated, when he had heard, staring with his soft brown eyes, his brown, soft-featured face alight with interest, "but that's fine of the little parson!"

"It's the kind of thing that sounds fine," she said. "Theoretically, it's right, of course. I wonder how it will 'pan out,' as you say."

"I hope he asks me! I'd like to let him know how decent I think it. I'd like to say to him, 'I'm prouder to meet your father and mother than to meet the king and queen.'"

"You can't very well say that, I think; but I'll tell him to send you a card."

He was going to dine at Westfields that evening—was Amanda to be there? That was well, then. Had the Gums ("Gum" was the playful name by which Mr. Algum was known in the school), themselves, been the only attraction he had been thinking of sending round word at the last minute that he had the toothache.

Had he a toothache on Sunday afternoon, when he



had not turned up, as usual, at the Wilderness? Amanda asked.

He looked at her with his softly candid gaze, noting that the curve of the lips and the faintly quizzical smile were a little stiff and artificial. He had been let into taking Scripture Lesson for Hardingham, who had the mully-grubs he told her.

"How good-natured you have become!" she commented on that, remembering with bitterness that he would not at one time have given up his Sunday afternoon with her to save Hardingham from a cruel death. She remembered also, but too late, that he did not allow any catechising about his proceedings, or criticism of what he chose to do. She understood that she was being punished for her indiscretion when he hastened to say that his good-nature, which was ever his undoing, had led him to promise to do the same work for the same suffering master till the end of term.

"Poor Mr. Hardingham! His mully-grubs going to last all that time!" she said. As she moved away from him she felt the smile on her face to be "a deadly thing." "I will see that you have a card to meet Papa Fisher," she said, and nodded farewell.

"Dear, darling old man! I will seize him by the beard and kiss him before the assembled throng if that will give his son any pleasure," Poole declared; and pulled off his cap, and looped away with his long, loose, characteristic stride.

It may as well be recorded in this place that in spite of the Algums not having relied on their own attractions alone for the success of their dinner, but

having secured the presence of Miss Chatterhouse, an allure which would have been potent a short while ago to draw him from the end of the earth, Aubrey Poole did not appear at Westfields that night.

"An excruciating toothache! Poor man, how he suffers with his teeth!" Mrs. Algum said, in accounting for the vacant place at her table. "The very last time he was to have come to us he was attacked by the same horrible pain."

"Poole must be warned not to have the same complaint, twice running, at the same house. It's a bit thick," the young master who sat beside her whispered to Amanda. "No one but Mrs. Algum would take it in for a minute."

"He wouldn't care in the least," Amanda whispered back, and contrived to smile as if she found the fact amusing.

When Amanda asked her father to go with her to the Rectory garden-party he promptly refused.

"You'd be amused," she encouraged him. "Old Mr. Fisher and his wife are to be there."

"And this fellow has had the cheek to ask you!" the General cried, turning in a spuffle of anger upon his daughter.

"Moreover, I am going," Amanda told him. "Come too, father. You like courage; Mr. Fisher is showing courage in this. He made a point of telling me they were to be there, and asked me to meet them. I call it magnificent courage."

"I call it infernal cheek!" the father cried. "Now, I won't have you going. I forbid you to go, do you hear, Amanda?"

Amanda paid about as much heed to her father's noisy embargoes as to the wind screeching at her window. Annoying! but only the wind. Of course she would go.

"You know that all of 'us'" ("us" in such a tone always meant the members of the College Set) "have decided not to go to the Rectory," Mrs. Algem was kind enough to premonish the General's daughter.

"But only yesterday Miss Fisher told me everyone was coming!"

"That was before they knew about the old Fishers—dear Amanda."

"What are they going to do, then? Have the toothache, all of them?"

"The toothache?" Mrs. Algem repeated. "By the way, I met Mr. Poole the day after our dinner, and the poor thing's cheek was enormous. It really made him look almost ugly; and he evidently dared not stop to speak."

"Swelled, was it?" Amanda asked; but she was not greatly concerned. She knew Aubrey Poole was the last man to walk about in public places with a swelled cheek, and suspected it had been only his tongue there.

"You see," Mrs. Algem pursued, "the day being immediately before Speech Day—such a silly thing to do—gives plenty of room for excuses—friends coming unexpectedly, fear of fatigue,—it will be quite easy. And you are really going?"

"Certainly," said Amanda, with her gentle air of indifference; "I promised." She had broken promises of the kind more than once in her life, as Mrs. Algem probably knew, but she had the

manner of being unassailable in her fidelity at the present moment.

"You will be alone! You won't find one of 'us' there."

"I meet you all so often. It won't hurt me for once, dear Mrs. Algum,—not to meet you," Amanda said.

Mrs. Algum, an assiduous woman where any matter touching the welfare of "the Set" was concerned, presently accompanied her submissive spouse to the golf-links; and there, over tea in the club-house, assailed the unsuspecting General on the same subject.

Her victim listened with outward politeness, confounding the irrepressible woman in his heart.

"Dear me! Dear me! I'll see to it," he said. He gulped his tepid tea, his ears open to a discussion that was going on behind him as to whether Daniels would get his handicap lowered; his eyelids bagged upon his cheeks, his cheeks hung upon a tortoise-like throat, a hairless roll of flesh bulged from his jacket collar. For the rest he was a short man, spare of flesh, with skinny red hands.

"You know me too well to be sure I would not dream of interfering, General; but when I tell you that no one is going to be present at this party but the Wings, the Medleys, the——"

"Dear me! Dear me! And is Amanda, do you say, going to meet these ruffians? Then I expect I shall have to go too, to look after her," the General said.

Then he put down his cup, and with a hasty "Excuse me!" hailed a man who was passing the entrance of the club-house and got away.

"The impertinence!" he said as he escaped. "Likely Amanda and I are going to be dictated to by that old snob!"

So, after all, it was under her father's wing that Amanda subsequently appeared at the Rectory garden-party.

For that dismaying fact Mrs. Algum had been in a measure prepared, but another concerning the much-talked-of entertainment came upon her as a heavy blow. The permanent colour which universally crimsoned her distinguished face, and would probably accompany her to her honoured grave, did not, of course, forsake her cheek; but when she learned that the garden-party was graced by the presence of the Bishop of the Diocese the poor lady *felt* as though she grew pale.

## CHAPTER VI

### THE GARDEN-PARTY

THAT the Bishop would, as usual, attend at the College on Speech Day had been anticipated ; but, Mr. Crabbe, his friend and relative, being gone, that he should still take up his abode for the preceding night at St. Luke's Rectory had not been dreamt of. Not even by the present incumbent, who showed no discomposure, however, at the honour conferred upon his house.

The suggestion had come from the spiritual lord himself ; and while Ursula had been absolutely overwhelmed with horror at the responsibility to be borne by her already burthened shoulders, her brother had forbidden her, on pain of his heavy displeasure, to breathe a word of the trial awaiting her. Not even at Arden must a whisper escape her. Harold had a wholesome terror of his father's fussiness ; if his mother did not know she could not be blamed for not telling him.

"The Bishop mayn't want to show up ; and if he does not, where's the use of saying anything about him ?" the rector argued.

The prelate was a very old, and physically weak man, and for the greater part of the afternoon of his arrival he rested in his own room ; but for half an hour

he came down, and he walked through the garden leaning on Harold's arm. Afterwards he sat by the side of Amanda, whom he knew very well, and chatted with her and the few people Harold brought up to him.

"Where is So-and-so, and So-and-so?" he asked, mentioning names of his clergy he had been wont to see at the Rectory.

It was of the rector he asked for these absent ones; but it was Amanda who, without putting the history into actual words, contrived to enlighten him as to the cause of the absence of the missing faces.

He listened to what she said without comment, and she was not quite sure he had perceived the drift of what she had merely indicated; until, presently, she heard him, in his sweetly tremulous voice, asking the rector to present to him his father and mother.

It was in that moment, perhaps, that Richard Fisher touched the highest his honest little tradesman's soul was likely to reach. Naturally, being mortal, he did not recognise the fact; and, even in the act of violently shaking from side to side the frail-looking episcopal hand, was thinking of how in recounting the episode he would make Daly the ironmonger "sit up" (Daly had a clever son of whom old Fisher was insanely jealous); and of what a happy time he would have, in the chemist's shop, repeating the Bishop's words to "good old Kiddle."

The Bishop, too enfeebled by the heartiness of the handshake to articulate, signed to the lady, bowing in her mauve satin before him, to take the empty chair next that from whence he had risen. Presently Amanda heard him murmuring in his faint, tired

voice—which gathered, so astonishingly, force and volume when he preached—to the gratified Mrs. Fisher praises of her son. And what he said, Amanda, who by her presence there felt herself to have taken the young clergyman in a measure under her protection, took care to repeat. So that the rector wondered at his greatly increased congregation on the following Sunday.

For, to the mass of people a thing that is staring them in the eyes and shouting in their ears is as good as non-existent till one says, Listen! See! And up to the present the fact that Harold Fisher was a fine preacher had escaped the notice of his parishioners.

"You are blessed in your son," the old man said to the mother by his side, "and should be proud of his gift of eloquence. He is an impressive speaker, and will be a useful Soldier of the Cross."

The eyes of the draper's wife filled with tears. "You are very kind to tell me that," she said. "I have always known it to be so, although I shall never forget that your lordship put it into words."

Then, in her sensible way, she moved her smart new sunshade to shield the back of the Bishop's head. "Hot as the sun is to-day there's a sharp twinge in the air, and a draught coming between those trees," she said. "You and me, that are subject to bronchitis, my lord, can't be too careful."

The Bishop had felt the draught, and was grateful. For the rest of the time he stayed in the garden it was to Mrs. Fisher he talked, hearing of her yearly attacks of bronchitis, and giving a history of his own. Harold's mother was not a woman with a large flow



As the rector crossed the lawn, the girl dragging limply behind him, a hand thrust loosely within his arm, "It is—it must be that awful little wretch from your lodgings," Amanda said to the man beside her. Even she, who was greatly disposed to make the best of everything, felt that she must exclude Daisy Meers. "I have the greatest horror of that fast little creature."

"Fast?" Aubrey Poole repeated in reproachful accents. "She is the merest child, I assure you. She is a child as fresh and innocent as her name, Amanda."

Amanda moved a contemptuous shoulder. "Yes. With her short frocks, her hair tied over one eye with blue ribbon, her vacant stare, she is labelled 'Baby.' And so, for people who require labels, she is one. I really think the Fishers might have drawn the line at such a baby as Daisy Meers!"

"Or if they must have produced her put her in long-clothes." A man forming a third in the little group of three made the suggestion. He had been considering with much interest the very liberal display of Daisy's ankles. "How on earth did she come here?" he asked.

Aubrey Poole, who knew everything, knew this also. "She's related to Fisher," he said. "Our 'gentle pulpeteer.' He'll be a Saint in Glory, Donne, when you and I, and perhaps Miss Chatterhouse, who is far and away wickeder than she thinks, are sinking into the nethermost hell. He thought the lodging-house a bad school for such an enchanting child, and carried her off to be under his own discreet eye."

Amanda displeasedly regarded the future saint and his charge, now coming towards them.

"What harm could she get at the lodging-house?" she asked.

"Bryant and Carter and Venning are there," Poole explained. "Venning, you know, loses his head over every pretty face he sees. He's been making a fool of himself, as usual. Giving the little one presents: books bound in white vellum, silver boxes for her hairpins, and so on——"

"The little one!" Amanda repeated scornfully. She would have hated to hear a term of endearment bestowed on a cat or a canary by those lips. "If the rector is going to make himself responsible for 'the little one' he'd better have caught her earlier, before she was the talk of the town; and when caught he should have dressed her less conspicuously."

"It would puzzle him to make her inconspicuous, whatever he dressed her in, with her eyes and that hair," Aubrey Poole said. And then the rector, Daisy Meers still clinging limply to his coat-cuff, anchored before them.

"Tell Miss Chatterhouse how many ices you have eaten already," Harold commanded her; and Daisy, with head hanging and eyes half shy, half sly, turned from the dark face of Poole to the cherubic countenance of Donne, hung back and said nothing.

"Come and get another with me, Baby," Aubrey said.

"And with me, Miss Meers," said Donne; and the girl walked away, smiling, between them, the rector sitting down in one of the vacated chairs.

"Will you take my cup," Amanda said, to get rid

of him; but he received the cup and put it beside him on the grass.

"It was very good of you to come," he said. "I hope you're not being greatly bored?"

"Do I look as if I were?" she asked him; and in his conscientious way he considered her face before answering.

"You're looking a little cross, for the moment," he told her; and added presently, "You never look very happy, I think."

She gave him one of her sidelong glances, moving her eyes momentarily from the figures she was watching across the lawn. They had been joined by two of the younger masters of whom Poole had spoken, and were standing in a group now. The men were laughing, while Daisy wriggled consciously, and stood on the sides of her feet, looking at each in turn with her vague brown eyes. Amanda guessed she was being called on again to say how many ices she had eaten, for when her lips moved in speech the others made pantomime of a shocked surprise. Presently they all moved on together, the four men eagerly bent, Amanda was sure, on encouraging the girl to eat a half-dozen ices more.

"What fools men are!" she said.

"You think so?" the rector asked her. "And do you greatly object?"

The corners of her lips moved. "Not always," she admitted.

"There you are, then, you see! Why complain?"

*"Toujours perdrix.* One is sometimes sick of fools."

"Then, talk to me," he said daringly.

"Where's the use?"

"Of what?"

"Of talking? Of all this talk? Two people approach each other, and instantly, although perhaps both long to be silent, the weariness of 'talk' begins. And if one of them happens to have something really to say, he might be speaking in an unknown tongue for all the other guesses at his meaning, or even cares to guess."

"Don't let us talk. Let's walk. Come down to the river at the bottom of the kitchen garden, and let us be, for the minute, dumb."

She was the more ready to go with him as, coming toward them by converging paths, with the intention each to seize upon his own offspring, she saw the clergyman's father and her own.

"Amanda, are you thinking about going off?" the General called to her, with a look in his eyes which plainly said, "You'd better be thinking about it."

"Arold, my dear boy! I don't know if you are aware his lordship's gone in? I wondered if you'd like to go and offer him one of those cigars I sent up?" Mr. Fisher eagerly inquired.

Both remarks fell on the deaf ears of Amanda and Harold, moving off.

"Pray take this seat, sir," the ex-tradesman pleaded, with an air of such anxious affability that the General, being a good-natured creature, at once complied, Mr. Fisher dropping into the chair alongside.

"My son, the Reverend Fisher, will bring Miss General Chatterhouse back quite safely," he said in a soothingly reassuring manner. "I think I know where my son is leading the young lady. There is

quite a party of wild-fowl in the stream at the bottom of the garden. My son considers it a pretty sight. I don't know, of course, if your young lady is by way of taking an interest in objects of nature?"

"A charming afternoon," the General said, waiving the subject of his daughter's tastes.

Old Fisher received the remark with a flattered smile. "It's very polite of you to say so, I'm sure," he said. "It certainly *'ave* been sunny. A wet afternoon, now, and, as I was saying to my good lady, all the best frocks spoilt, and not 'alf the fun!"

"It has been very enjoyable," the other said, perjuring himself with his best grace.

He remembered, with uncomfortable distinctness at the moment, an altercation with the erstwhile head of Regent House over an umbrella which had been bought at that establishment and had not worn well. It was the only transaction with his host's father, beyond the paying of the yearly bill, which he could recall. He had used on the occasion some rather violent expressions to the meek tradesman, who, by the humility of his bearing, had deprecated his wrath. "An umbrella like that is no better than a swindle," he remembered saying. "When you charged me a guinea for it you swindled me!"

It was awkward to find the servile recipient of these vituperations conversing to him now on equal grounds.

"I'm sure," Harold's father was continuing, "both my son and my wife and my daughter Ursula—for we've all, as you might say vulgarly, had a finger in the pie—will be very proud to 'ear you say so. I

may add, if you'll excuse me saying it, that neither trouble nor expense have been spared to do the thing as it should be done. Don't spoil the ship for the 'a'porth o' tar, I said to my son 'Arold."

"Pleasant garden, I always think," the General murmured.

"I suppose, sir, you've 'ad a walk round the grounds? If not, I shall have pleasure, I'm sure. Lawyer Nash, and Mr. Wing from the Bank and his lady, have been inspecting everything under my guidance. Even to the kitchens," he added, cackling with pride. "Mrs. Wing—a good 'ouse-keeper herself—'ad a particular desire to see the kitchens. And, as I told her, we have nothing to hide. Walk where you like to-day—Liberty 'All."

The General here hastily remarked that he knew the place very well, having been a frequent visitor in old Mr. Crabbe's time.

"And not a less frequent one, I 'ope, in my son's. I'm sure, 'General Chatterhouse" (he conscientiously enunciated the three syllables of the name which custom arbitrarily pronounced in two, and he chafed his grey-gloved hands one with the other with a sound of stretched leather on stretched leather which set the hearer's teeth on edge), "nothing will give 'Arold and my daughter Ursula greater pleasure than for you and Miss General Chatterhouse to drop in as the fancy takes you."

The General thanked him, and pulled his underlip down from his moustache, exposing his teeth and gums, a habit he had when suffering any discomfort, and looked out of his pendulous blue eyes anxiously for his daughter.

"You have only one, in family, I think, General Chatterhouse?"

"No, no. Only one child, of course." He did not desire to discuss his family affairs with the man who had swindled him over his umbrella, but was afraid of appearing discourteous. Hang Amanda! Why didn't she come?

"Then, you know nothing of the expenses of a son, sir, I take it. And of putting a young man into a position like this. I reckon the placing of 'Arold—no expense spared, I admit, a college education, understand; none of your back-door sneaking into the Church—comes out at a cool two thousand or thereabout. Furnishing the 'ouse, of course, included. Why, the green leather suit in the dining-room alone, you may take my word for it, cost price too, made a fifty-pound note look silly——"

The old man was now well launched on the theme which it had been the dream of his life to expound to the General and his kind. They saw Harold where he was—yes,—but how many of them guessed what it had cost to put him there?

"I suppose you do not mean me to be really dumb?" Amanda asked, as she and the rector walked down a long green alley towards the river running between the kitchen garden and the withy beds of the opposite shore.

"As you like, exactly," he answered. "I am equally content to walk with you in any mood of yours."

Amanda shifted the sunshade which was between his face and hers, and gave him a swift look.

"You were saying," he went on, "there is so much

chattering. Such a buzz of it in one's ears. And that it means so little. Just the obeying of the silly law that when two are together tongues must wag. Perhaps it would be more restful, then, two being in accord, to be silent?"

"Perhaps," Amanda agreed drily. "Meanwhile I think you and I will contribute to the general buzz, and talk. Your first party has been a success, hasn't it?"

"As far as it goes. Most of the people didn't come. More than half those who accepted were, by the strangest coincidence, prevented at the last minute."

"It has been very well without them," Amanda said. "Rome was not built in a day," she added after a pause.

He knew she was alluding to the building up of his social position, and she had known that he would know and not be offended. He looked out in a moment's silence from beneath the hat he had tilted to shield his eyes from the sun.

"For all that, you know, I care nothing," then he said. "I should not trouble to make the avowal to other people; they would not believe me. You will believe me. It seems to me preposterous that men should care. Until I came here—except in the relations of priest and people—I have hardly come in contact with Society. I was too hard-worked, my life too much of a rush. And now that I have time to consider it,—its laws, its penalties, its rigorous slavery, its unpitying, stupid cruelty, I can't tell you how these strike me! So relentless, and so ridiculous!"



"You mean you would do away with the restrictions of caste, Mr. Fisher?"

"And you, by your tone, and by the lift of your lip, mean that an expression of contempt for class should come from the mouth of one who is well-born, not from that of the Wynborough draper's son. I agree heartily with you there; and that is why I hold my tongue on the subject, except to you. I expect you to do me the honour to understand, Miss Chatterhouse; and to believe every word I say to you."

"And if I promise to do that, you must make me a promise in return to believe quite half of what I say to you, Mr. Fisher."

He would not be diverted from his theme. "These people have refused to come to our house because my sister and I are our father's son and daughter. I understand it quite well. I don't particularly regret it; I don't resent it at all. They are obeying the law which they have made for themselves,—good citizens of a world of their own construction. But I, in a sense, you perceive, am not of that world; its laws are nothing to me. To no one but you shall I make audible protest. But—you said that word about Rome just now—I should like you to understand."

"I do. I know exactly how you feel," Amanda protested. The position was clear enough. If she had been born the offspring of the High Street linen-draper, she knew very well she would have had her fling at the superior class which threw her on one side.

"But it is not possible for you to take the same dispassionate, unprejudiced outlook?"

"Dear me, yes!" Amanda said. "'A man's a man for a' that'; 'We're all equal in the sight of God'; and so on. There's nothing particularly new in your view, is there?"

"But do you, in your heart, believe in it?"

"I daresay I do—when I get down to my heart."

"That is all right, then," he said cheerfully. "It is only when you get there it matters."

They were not the only two who had walked away from the garden proper, between the sweet-pea fences, and beneath the rose arches, to where the river flowed, a broad, shallow stream dividing the kitchen garden from the great green withy beds of the farther shore. By the weed-choked stream Ursula Fisher and young Mr. Wing, the clerk from the County Bank, were standing.

"What a pleasant face she has!" Amanda said, as, having spoken a word to her host's sister, she and the rector turned away. "She looks good and happy."

She was both of those things her brother hoped.

"You said just now I did not look happy. I wonder what you meant?" Amanda said, who liked to introduce the personal note in a conversation. "Do you really think I don't?"

She intended him to look at her, to justify his statement, perhaps; and he did, taking a leisurely, steady survey of her face, which was smiling at him, a mischievous glitter in the eyes.

"I really think you don't," he said deliberately, then.

"Mr. Fisher, how dare you!" she flashed upon him. Then the laughing light was chased from her face, and she walked on with a suddenly pensive brow. "It's quite true. You've guessed it," she

acknowledged. "I'm not happy ; not a bit. Only, I did not think I showed it. I hope it doesn't make me look very ugly? Or old? Does it make me look old, Mr. Fisher?"

"How old are you?" he asked her.

She laughed aloud. "You certainly don't want courage!" she said. "Guess."

"Anything from twenty-five to one or two and thirty."

"You are no flatterer. I am twenty-eight. You should have guessed me at twenty, at the most."

"Why? You don't look twenty. You look, to my thinking, quite your age."

"You are a perfect monster! You ought not to be at large among unsuspecting, sophisticated people!" She laughed, but monosyllabically, and was grave again. "Isn't this a disappointing, cheating, disgusting life?" she asked him.

"I don't find it so. What is the matter with it?"

"Ingratitude, selfishness, restlessness, vanity, idleness—you know the usual string of stupid, unavoidable ills that make up the sum of feminine misery."

"Nothing more?"

She answered him with a laugh only.

"I think there is something more," he said.

She dropped her parasol and looked up, through the deep red clusters of roses on the arch beneath which they paused, at the deep blue of the sky. "I love these crimson roses, don't you?" she asked him. "I love this old Rectory garden. It is a restful, beautiful, charming place."

The swift, searching look he turned on her was full of a vivid earnestness; points of flame sprang

alight in the dark of his deep eyes. "Is that so?" he asked, and his voice had a grating tone. "Could you, do you think, be happy here?"

She seemed to stop breathing for an instant, but, except by her absolute stillness through the tiny pause, gave no sign of surprise.

"I am quite sure I could not," then she said with the utmost deliberate calm.

And then General Chatterhouse, having at length succeeded in shunting the father of his host, was observed to be bearing down upon them. It was to be seen at once that the General was angry.

"I have looked for you for half an hour, Amanda," he said. "You knew I was ready to go half an hour ago."

"It's done," he said to her, as, having made their adieux, they walked away. "I went to teach that howler of an Algum to leave my affairs alone. But that's the finish, remember. We don't want to put ourselves in that position more than once; and we won't. That miserable old draper-man had the cheek to ask me to look at a bundle of bills he had paid while his son was at College. He carries them about with him. He fastened on to Aubrey Poole when I escaped. I saw him bringing out his package as we passed them just now."

## CHAPTER VII

### "THE SAFE MAN"

"**I** WAS, myself, in two minds about refusing," Mrs. Sucker said as she and her daughter loitered along the London Road in the companionship of Mrs. Algum. "I have not, so far, as you are aware, been called on to associate with the outside Set."

Mrs. Algum, smiling deprecatingly upon the heated tone of this remark, conveyed, without perjuring herself in words, her sense of the unlikelihood of anyone labouring under such a misconception.

"Elvira, however, over-persuaded me. She was reading in the etiquette column of one of the ladies' papers quite recently that a garden-party introduction, even supposing we were introduced to any of them, can be afterwards ignored. I suppose you endorse that opinion, Mrs. Algum?"

"Of course!" the lady breathed, and raised her lips to show her gleaming teeth, while from her black eyes there glinted a look of supreme distaste in the direction of Elvira; whom, although it sometimes suited her to tolerate her vulgar mother, she would not tolerate at any price.

"If it hadn't been for that we couldn't have stuck it," Elvira put in.

Mrs. Sucker was sometimes useful to Mrs. Algum.

It was from her she learnt details concerning certain people in a lower social stratum than her own, but in whose doings and goings she nevertheless took a sort of royal interest. It was upon her that she now relied to give her the history of the garden-party from which she had felt compelled to absent herself.

Needless to say she was terribly pained by what she heard. For not only had Mrs. Sucker to chronicle the presence of the Middlejohns, the Provarts, the Ecklings, who had always been permitted to cling to the skirts of the élite, but there had been present the Wings, the Drakes, the Johnsons; nay, incredible as it may seem, even the Sumners themselves, the present proprietors of Regent House, had been there.

Mrs. Algum, as she listened, was moved almost to tears. “In the garden the dear Crabbes loved!” she ejaculated. As the recital went on she repeated faintly, again and again, the phrase, “The dear Crabbes’ garden!” as if lacking the strength to say more.

Never had such a set been seen there before, Mrs. Sucker eagerly assured her. Except, of course, on occasions of parochial meetings, when the people had to be asked for contributions; or when a “missionary, or someone,” addressed a gathering there, and held a bag round while the people drank their tea; when, of course, just anyone was admitted.

It was only on such occasions that Mrs. Sucker had been admitted hitherto, as none knew better than Mrs. Algum.

It was the fact of the Bishop’s presence on such a scene which gave the poignant note of tragedy to the recital.

"And none of his clergy present! None of the familiar faces to greet him! What a grievous experience! It is really enough to break his heart. At his age, too! and the homage which has always been paid him by all, and the loving attention of the dear Crabbes! How did he seem to bear it, Mrs. Sucker? Was there no one—*no one* with whom he might have taken refuge?"

"There was Miss Chatterhouse, of course. I saw her laughing with him and giving him the almond-icing off her cake. Passing it in her fingers. I didn't think it looked very refined of her."

"She was sitting in his pocket whenever she could get there," Elvira contributed.

"But he was mostly talking to Mrs. Fisher. I should think for a good half-hour he sat and talked to her."

"Dear, saint-like old man! His heart must be broken!" Mrs. Algum sighed.

She had an opportunity of inquiring into the condition of his heart on the next day, which was Speech Day at the College.

She gazed with compassionate interest upon his handsome old face as he sat at the Master's right hand, the centre of the group of distinguished visitors and of the half circle of College masters in their gowns and hoods.

"Dear, dear old man, how grieved, how ashamed I am! What a sweet old face it is!" she exclaimed in an ecstatic whisper to the lady seated beside her.

"Why are you grieved and ashamed, Mrs. Algum?" Amanda demanded. But she got no

more explanation than was conveyed by an "I could an I would" expression, by tightly locked lips, and eyes fixed in a commiserating stare upon the Bishop.

When the prize-giving was over, and the members of the distinguished half circle were merged in the crowd of parents and visitors, Mrs. Algum managed to seize upon her prey.

"At last!" she said, and rapturously squeezed the white, delicate hand of the old man in her two gloved ones. "I am longing to ask you for Lady Augusta? And to say to you, is it wise of you to have come to Wynborough so soon after your illness?"

The Bishop, who had been her victim on former occasions, murmured a satisfactory account of his wife and his health, and peered beyond her.

The sympathetic woman dropped her voice. "It must be so sad for you to be staying at the Rectory under these changed circumstances! The dear Crabbes gone, and——"

It was her fancy, surely, that the Bishop was cold to her. The "sweet old man" was getting infirm, and they were in a crowded place. Certainly his attention wandered. While she was still pouring out her stores of sympathy, and while the glittering eyes were still fixed hungrily upon his face, someone passing stopped to speak to him, and the Bishop turned away.

"Charming old man! Such courteous manners!" Mrs. Algum murmured to her husband, standing, in gown and hood, at her elbow. "He is much enfeebled in body. I hope his intellect is not also impaired."



She presently had the satisfaction of seeing his feebleness supported across the gaily crowded quadrangle, beneath the historic avenue of limes, by the shoulder of the new rector of St. Luke's, upon which the tall old man had chosen to lean. On his other side walked Amanda, the best dressed and most attractive figure in that multitude of well-looking, fashionably garbed people.

Among those who saluted him as he moved slowly through the crowd were many who noted the attitude of the old prelate towards the young priest. Many comments were made, and some took a lesson in silence. With the result that when young Fisher appeared in the luncheon hall it might have been thought he was the most popular person present, judging by the many who called to him that room could be made for him at their tables.

But a greater honour still was in store for the suddenly favoured young man. At the raised table reserved for the Headmaster and his distinguished guests was an empty place, one of the illustrious having failed to appear. His absence had been lamented in the Master's speech, and speculation was rife as to who should be asked to fill his seat. After a whispered conference between the old Master and his old friend, the Bishop, it was the Reverend Harold Fisher who was seen to be mounting the dais.

"It is lowering the dignity of the College!" Mrs. Algum declared. "The Master has been most ill-advised. These distinctions should not be bestowed in a merely casual way. If it must have been given to a clergyman, why not to a clergyman of the College? Fifteen of our masters are in Orders—*all*

of them have claims superior to Mr. Fisher’s—why not to one of them?”

“A lady should have been invited,” Aubrey Poole declared. “The place should have been yours, Mrs. Algum.”

All the Algum teeth showed in the smile that was turned upon the discerning master of the Army Class. “I hardly know by what right, Mr. Poole——”

“By a kind of natural right,” Poole said, with that increased gravity of tone and face which those who knew him best knew to mean that he was, as they phrased it, “getting at” somebody. “The right of happening to be the one person attached to the College to be depended on to fill any post of honour with dignity and grace.”

“Gently, Poole!” the warning voice of a younger man beside him said whisperingly.

Poole answered him aloud, with a high, reproachful glance. “Thank you, Gibbs; Mrs. Algum and I have a perfect understanding. She allows me to say to her face exactly what I think.”

Harold Fisher found himself seated by General Chatterhouse’s daughter. “Mrs. Algum will never forgive you,” Amanda said.

“What is it now?” he asked, with a frankly distressed air. He took quite seriously his mission of peace; in spite of what Amanda had called to herself “the pugnacious jaw of him” it gave him real discomfort to arouse feelings of enmity.

“She thinks she should be in your place. Mrs. Algum wishes to be seated beside you, father,” she whispered across her neighbour on her other hand to the General.

The retired officer threw around him alarmed glances. "By me?" he cried. "That holy terror of a woman? No, no!"

The suggestion disturbed him through lunch, and he glared so wildly upon Mrs. Algum, whose table was only just below the slightly-raised platform on which the Headmaster's lunch was set, that the excellent lady was quite fascinated by his regard, and stared back with all her glittering orbs.

"He must be wishing me to understand he is annoyed by finding himself placed in the neighbourhood of Mr. Fisher," she said to herself. "Or perhaps he is trying to express to me that he also thinks it is I who should have been asked to fill the vacant place."

In the half-hour between lunch and the sacred concert, which was to take place in the chapel, Amanda found herself, having drifted there she scarcely knew how, in the school library; found the Reverend Harold Fisher again by her side.

They stood together, talking in a desultory way, he pulling out from the shelves a volume, here and there, to show her. They had wandered in with a group of other people, who, by twos and threes, presently sauntered out again as they had sauntered in. The clergyman was not aware that the rest had departed, but Amanda was aware. She did not particularly desire to hear the organ recital, and she did wish to get from Mr. Fisher an explanation of a word or two he had said on the preceding day.

Could she be happy at the Rectory?

She had heard the words with outward admirable

calm, but in reality they had greatly startled her; and she had meditated on them and the speaker a good deal.

Had he intended by that speech to make her an offer of marriage? Was it a declaration?

If so, it was a most unlooked-for turn in the course of events. If not, what, exactly, had he meant? Was more to come; or would he accept her answer as final and sufficing?

Amanda, during her twenty-eight years of motherless existence, had laid up for herself, she imagined, great accumulation of worldly wisdom. One of the most prized, most firmly relied on treasures of her store, was that contained in the hackneyed saw that man was woman's lawful prey. In the long-run every woman was made to suffer by some man; let her wring his withers while she could.

Therefore, although her impulse had been to answer the clergyman's question with the tersest negation, reflection impelled her to have it out with him at greater length. It was better, in such a matter, to leave no possible loop-hole of misunderstanding. Also, to herself she owed it to clear up any doubt as to whether he were really captive to her bow or no.

She would betray him to no one. She had proved herself able to keep one or two such secrets already. But in the unsettled state of her own love-affair it would afford her a species of consolation to reflect that she had made a man suffer in his turn. It would divert her thoughts, at any rate.

They had left the book-shelves, over whose treasures Harold had been gloating,—for he loved books and could not keep his fingers off them,—and had moved

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to one of the narrow tables placed in double rows down the room. Amanda sat down there and played with the leaves of one of the picture papers lying before her, watching, the while, the man on the other side of the table, who had picked up *Punch* and was quickly looking through its pages.

Not a sound was in the room but the rustle of the turning leaves, not a live thing in all the big, lofty-ceilinged place but themselves; save the sunlight which streamed from a window overhead upon the rector's dark, smooth hair and pale-complexioned, clever face.

He had persistently kept beside her all day. If he had intended to follow up his strange speech of yesterday the chance to do so had been his, over and over again. At the present moment, as it seemed to Amanda, opportunity was not only ripe but rotten.

He looked long at a picture, and "a low smile gi'ed he." "Very funny!" he said to himself as he turned the page.

"You are not very funny," Amanda said. "At least, you are not very amusing."

His eyes as he looked at her over the top of the paper still held the smile. "I know," he answered. "Did you expect me to be?"

"For half an hour you have stood before me and have not opened your lips."

He glanced at the big clock opposite him, at the end of the long room. "The half-hour struck as we came to this table. It is now two minutes past the half-hour," he mildly intimated.

Amanda gave him one of her quick glances, shot

from languid lids. "You are not so slow-witted as to measure time by the hands of a clock—always?"

He looked at her attentively, then held the open paper across to her. "*Punch* is extra good this week," he said. "Look at this."

She lightly tossed the paper on one side without looking at it, and with a touch of petulance.

"I'm keeping you from your friends; and I bore you terribly. Shall we go?" he suggested.

The suggestion nettled Amanda. "He does not look stupid, but he is stupid," she said to herself. She had been accustomed to flirt and fence with one who knew her methods and was an expert, when it pleased him, at the game. It was a game she meant to win at now, if, instead of her light foils, she had to choose a bludgeon.

"Yesterday when we walked down to the river you did not bore me," she said.

He had a habit of snapping his eyelids quickly when much moved or interested. She watched him do this now, then met the darted questioning of his eyes. The bludgeon must come into use; but Amanda had a certain shame in wielding it. Her glance shifted from his face and her colour rose.

"When you asked me if I could be happy in the Rectory, what did you mean?" she asked him, a tell-tale quaver in her voice.

"I meant 'could you?' Just that," he answered quickly. "You said you could not," he reminded her in a falling voice.

"If my father had not pounced upon us then I should have asked you to forgive the bluntness of my answer," Amanda said, looking down now upon the

journal before her and gently swaying one of its leaves between her white-gloved finger-tips. "You took me so much by surprise, I had not time to give to your question one thought."

"And now? Having given it thought?" he asked her.

She glanced at him, and down again at the gently fluttering page. She had seen that his face was paler, and his eyes eager.

"I'm afraid—in substance—I can only say the same," she admitted in a small voice, suddenly ashamed of the part she had played.

The silence that fell weighed heavily on her; with an effort she forced herself to break it.

"I brought the subject up again," she said, as if he had accused her, "because it seemed to be due both to you and to me not to leave it without a word of explanation on either side. For my part I wished to say I was sorry."

"No. Why should you be that?" he said, and his voice was very gentle. "It was a presumptuous idea of mine; but it had hold of me violently at the moment——"

"*For* the moment?" Amanda questioned, turning upon him.

"—You seemed restless, unhappy—the idea that you might be at peace and happy there—with me."

Amanda was piqued. "All for my sake?" she said. "I might have spared myself my remorse! You suffered no disappointment? It was on your side pure benevolence?"

"Call it what you like. As—whatever it was—it was balked, what does it matter?"

"It, at any rate, was very kind," Amanda said, and said it with sincerity, moved by something in his tone.

"Shall we go now?" he asked her; and she assented, but lingered still as if there might be something more to say.

Then steps were heard in the corridor; and at the sound of a mellow, whispering voice and a girl's light answering laugh, Amanda looked up.

Aubrey Poole came into the library, escorting a very young, very giggly, very pretty sister of one of the boys. To her he had devoted himself through the day, doing the honours of the place.

"Oh, how dreadfully dull it looks!" the girl cried. "And what a horrible lot of books! Are the poor boys obliged to read them all, Mr. Poole?"

"Twice a week," he told her; and added some absurd detail of what, besides, in the matter of literature, was expected of the Wynburians.

The account was accepted by the girl with her ready laugh and her "Oh, *really*, Mr. Poole!" and the pair came down the long room; the tall man, looking taller in his flowing gown, his college cap in his hand, the light as he passed the great windows falling on the rusty brown of his hair and the red brown of his handsome, softly-featured face. As he walked he whispered nonsense to the girl beside him, or laughed his mellifluous laugh in response to her chatter.

He showed her the illuminated missal which was the pride of the library, and drew her attention to the picture of the founder over the fireplace.

"Just such an old grump as you'd expect to make a bother about books!" the girl cried, with her shoulder turned upon the benefactor.



She looked with far more interest at the young clergyman with the pale and earnest face, and the elegant, charmingly dressed woman at the end table. For all she or they could tell her escort might not have been aware of their presence. His glance on his entry had glided over them as if it passed over empty space, and he looked no more in their direction.

As the pair left, Amanda laid the magazine she had been playing with on the table and rose up.

"I am afraid I have kept you from the concert," Fisher said, as he picked up his hat and followed her down the room.

"Oh no," she said; but he knew that she answered mechanically.

When they had reached the end of the long lane between the tables, and were at the door, she stopped and turned to him. "One minute!" she said. "I try to be a reasoning and reasonable woman, Mr. Fisher. I think and think about things, and with infinite calculation make up my mind to the wise course. Then, in a moment, all that wisdom is brushed aside and I act on impulse, like the silliest simpleton in the world. I promised to tell no one a certain thing. I meant to tell no one. All at once I feel I must die or tell you. You saw that man who has just left the room? You know him?"

"Aubrey Poole? Yes."

"I am engaged to be married to him."

"Are you sure?" Harold asked. He put the stupid question involuntarily. His face had paled. To him the moment was tragic, although he had nothing tragic to say.

"I see," he said slowly. He looked at her with a

certain intensity of solicitude, as if he were trying in earnest to exercise a power with which once or twice he had been credited, the power to look down into a soul.

"It is a secret," she told him, meeting with a shaken feeling his regard.

"Why?"

"We both wish it. We both hate fuss. The fuss that is made here over an engagement. Aubrey Poole is not the man to endure that kind of thing; and I don't wish to make him endure it."

"In view of the fact, I should have thought such a matter absolutely unimportant."

She turned without replying, and they walked down the wide, white-washed corridor which led to the great stone staircase and the boys' quarters. The place was still and empty, their footsteps and their voices echoed with a hollow sound.

"There would have been, first of all, stories of my age," Amanda began presently in her lightest tone. "Mrs. Algum would remember I was of age ten years ago when she first saw me. I wasn't, you know; but Mrs. Algum would remember that. Then there would be the history of my many misdemeanours. Everyone would have tales of this and that person I tried to 'catch.' Mr. Lemmon—you know he is always so funny!—would invent a comic history he would not expect the most credulous to believe of the wiles I used to ensnare Aubrey; of Aubrey's frantic efforts to escape them,—well, everyone would believe it. Aubrey's income and my extravagance would furnish material for the town for a month's gossip——"

"But to you and him what would it matter?"

Such things were as absolutely nothing to him who spoke. He would not, in the other man's place, even have wasted time in calling them nothing.

"When we are to be married we will give them a certain notice. They shall not be cheated of their talk. Until then, we prefer to keep our own affairs to ourselves."

They reached the head of the great stone staircase; from the passages below came the sound of chasing feet, and boys' voices calling. Harold went down a step and turned to look up at her, his hand on the iron rail.

"And now, what made you tell me?" he asked.

She let her lids droop over her eyes, and her cheeks grew pinker. "After what you were good enough to—to suggest to me——" she began.

"You thought it kinder to let me know at once it was hopeless. That much I understand. Was that the only reason?"

For a space she considered him, and the little smile which made her face so sweet when she meant to flatter moved her lips.

"You have a face to compel confidences," she told him. "Your lips lock as if nothing could open them against their will. Your eyes are very graves of secrets. You know, we have in Wynborough a habit, caught from the boys, of giving names to people other than those we use in addressing them. Mine for you is 'The Safe Man.' Burglar-proof, fire-proof, water-proof. I know that upon my secret, now you have it, you will turn many keys. Perhaps, some day, I shall like to give you some more to keep for me."

"No!" he said sharply. "One is enough. One;

and this more. Tell me, are you happy in this engagement? Does it satisfy you?"

"No."

"But you mean to go through with it?"

"I should die if I could not."

"You love this man and mean to marry him?"

"Yes."

"That is all. I thank you for telling me," he said ; and walked quickly before her down the wide steps.

On the next bare, white-walled landing one of the younger masters stopped Amanda with some laughing remark ; a half-dozen boys sprang with flying leaps down the stone steps of the staircase ahead. The new rector of St. Luke's, without looking backward, went on his way alone.

## CHAPTER VIII

### MOST AFFABLE

**W**ROUGHT of finer material, it would have been with salt tears that Daisy Meers ate the bread of Arden and went up and down its stairs.

The good lady of the house, try as she might to be kind, could not forget that her enforced hospitality was extended to the child she disliked of parents she despised, planted for an indefinite period beneath her roof. Whenever her unwilling eyes fell on the interloper she was struck with a fresh surprise at her beauty. Harold had been right. Ursula, beside this girl, looked peaked and drab-hued and old. What right had poor, half-baked Alice Meers to have a child more remarkable than her own? What right had she to foist her upon Mrs. Fisher, at any rate?

As for Harold's father, he had never wavered from his first repugnance. But that his son's reputation had been involved in the matter no consideration would have weighed with him to permit this desecration of his household gods.

But, luckily, perhaps, Daisy was one who accepted what fell to her share with no very active feelings, one way or the other. She had neither the skill to criticise her own nor to analyse other people's sensations. Although life was far duller in the ex-linen-

draper's house than the life to which she had grown accustomed, she did not openly rebel or complain. When the sun shone dazzlingly upon her glistening hair, and in her wide brown eyes, as she sat among the flower-beds of the little lawn, she would have preferred to put on her tam-o'-shanter and run up the High Street. She liked to meet the College boys, bicycling wildly about the place, their books hidden in cushions under their arms; or walking in threes and fours, their hands in their trouser-pockets, down the wide pavement of the street. They all looked at her with welcoming eyes as she passed; even the littlest chubby-faced boys; and at the biggest she smiled; and those in the tuck-shop left their tarts and their ices and flew to stare at her over the red curtain of the window as, with a backward toss at them of the streaming hair, she passed along.

It was not only the boys. The masters all looked at her with attention. She had seen them alter their course, cross the street, stand to look in at a window, every one of whose contents they knew by heart, in order to meet her face to face. And the clerks at the County Bank, the young men in the post-office, and the co-operative grocery stores——!

She was barely seventeen. Other girls of her age were busy over their hockey, their music, their beautiful girl-friendships—these poor excitements were all the distraction poor Daisy had; and they had become as meat and drink to foolish Alice Meers' lovely child.

To Mr. Fisher and his wife it seemed that their unwelcome guest was living in a paradise of well-being. They regarded her, standing idle on their

hard-rolled gravel-paths, or seated listlessly beneath their cork alcove hung with ferns, gazing with vacant eyes upon the star-shaped bed of geraniums and the moon-shaped bed of begonias; or placed at their well-stocked, spotless board. Surely in her mother's stuffy back-room at Jasmine House she could not have dreamed, even, of such delights of well-ordered sufficiency and immaculate respectability. How could they guess how dull it all seemed to Daisy?

Now and again, taking her responsibility as guardian of the girl in the thorough way she accepted all her duties, Mrs. Fisher walked with her to the door of the mother's house, and waited, walking up and down the pavement, till her charge reappeared.

"It's like being a prisoner," Daisy whined to her mother. "I'll run away before long. You see if I don't!"

Once, when Mrs. Meers was not in the back sitting-room where she had sought her, Daisy stood in the hall and called her name. She called it with something furtive in the tone, and she looked up, as if nothing unexpected had happened, when a door above-stairs opened, and instead of Mrs. Meers a man came running down.

With a noiseless, quick step he came, his dark eyes softly glowing, and in his hands a great box of chocolates.

"I mayn't have them!" Daisy said, and put her hands behind her. "The old cat is waiting for me, outside. I mayn't so much as look over her garden hedge. Unless she sees who it goes to, I mayn't write a letter."

"Pooh! Nonsense!" he said. "Open your pockets, Baby."

He tore the broad ribbon from the box, and emptied the contents into the pockets of her loose coat, putting a few within her gloved fingers,—she was promoted to the honour of habitual gloves since Mrs. Fisher had taken her in hand. When he came to the sort she particularly affected, apricot, cased in chocolate and garnished with a crystallised rose-leaf, he put it in her mouth. Then stood to watch her demolish it, another in his fingers ready to pop between her teeth when that should be done.

She ate, looking up to the velvet brown eyes above her as if they fascinated her.

"Baby!" he whispered once or twice, "Baby!" and fed her with another sweet.

He slipped his hand between her neck and the heavy tail of hair—now decently gathered with a ribbon instead of hanging wildly about her shoulders, to be tossed with a stirring wind across her own face, across the faces of other people. "'What's become of all the gold?'" he asked, and fingered the warm, living mass.

"She will have it like this! She likes me to be hideous. She says the other way isn't respectable at my age."

"When are you coming back? Dirty Bella brings in my tea, now. I don't care to drink it when you don't bring it, Baby."

"I'm not coming back any more," poor Daisy told him; and her mouth fell at the corners with a twitching of its curves and a lovely, infantile



pathos. "I'm going to be a nursery governess, now. Mrs. Fisher is trying to find me a place."

"Let Mrs. Fisher and all her works consume perpetually in everlasting flames! You shan't go to any 'place' of her finding."

"She's waiting on the step for me. I must go now or I shall catch it, Mr. Poole! Good-bye."

She was turning away, but his hand was still enmeshed in her hair. He caught her back by it, and while she stood, patiently submitting to his caress, saying nothing and apparently feeling nothing, he buried his face in the glowing mass.

"Good-bye, Baby," he said at last, and lifted a face a shade paler, and with a veil over the soft brilliance of his eyes.

"Good-bye, Mr. Poole," she said, and ran away to the guardian, keeping watch, as guardians so often do, on the wrong side of the door.

Old Fisher was by no means an inaccessible person. To stop while passing his gate, to speak of the luxuriant growth of the clematis over the arch, or the charming effect of the geraniums and lobelias in the star-bed, was to get, as a matter of certainty, an invitation to enter in order to view at nearer hand the beauties of Arden.

Aubrey Poole, who made it the business of his life as far as possible to avoid the irksome places in it, could yet endure a certain amount of boredom where it answered his purpose. With an end in view he had been known to sit an hour *l'le-à-l'le* with Mrs. Algum. He sat, now and then, for half that space of time on the smart garden-chairs in the

trim little garden of old Fisher's retreat, and listened, or seemed to listen, while his host talked "Arold" to his heart's content.

"Quite chatty and affable!" the old man assured his wife. "I always thought there was something sarcastic about that young man, but I find him most affable."

Exactly what he meant when he called a person "sarcastic" Mr. Fisher could not have defined. It was a term applied generally to anyone falling short of his approval. But to name an acquaintance "affable" was to bestow on him his highest praise.

Sometimes, from his darling theme to the subject of his garden old Fisher suffered himself to be lured. Poole was fond of flowers, his expenditure on them was lavish, his room always profusely decorated with them. It was much less boring to talk about the latest lovely variations of gladioli, the last new thing in carnations, than the everlasting son. Often, too, the master of the house sought the sympathy of his visitor on the subject of his own unwelcome guest.

"A distant connection of my good lady's; doesn't come of a stock I approve. A small tradesman's daughter; kept at arm's length all her life, and now thrust upon me! Mrs. Fisher and I consider she does us no credit."

"If she belonged to me I should consider that she did me credit," Poole cried. "Not a credit! Why, she's the loveliest thing in Wynborough, Mr. Fisher."

"That fact don't make it the more pleasant to me, sir," the other explained. "She eats as much,

takes up as much room. Me and my wife can't speak for a pair of ears always open."

"I consider it a matter of thanksgiving for you. Great Heaven, man! you and Mrs. Fisher should be on your knees, thanking God for the privilege of gazing upon your guest."

Daisy was standing in the garden, keeping watch on the road over the hedge while these remarks were passing. It was her favourite post and occupation. Already Mrs. Fisher fancied more of the male population than had been accustomed to walk there strolled past the trim-cut fence of Arden.

"Here is the rector!" now she cried; and, running out to meet him, brought young Fisher in, with her hand upon his arm.

Another smart garden-seat was dragged up to the little iron table by which the two men were already sitting. To celebrate the occasion the host must produce a bottle of port of which he was proud; must call, in his thin, spuffling voice, to his wife to bring out some glasses.

So they sat in the sunshine in the glowing, scented garden, and the old man at least was proud and happy, as he made strange noises with his lips and teeth, expressive of his admiration of the wine.

"Seventies, I believe, sir," he said, and sucked drops of the rosy liquid from his moustache. "Very fine and rich vintage. I took them for a bad debt, 'Arold. Lucky to get 'old of them, I say. You are a judge, no doubt, Mr. Poole. I've never had the honour of dining at the Common Room table, but I've 'eard you gentlemen of the College drink the best of wines."

Aubrey sipped his port, rolled it on his tongue, sat up, opened his eyes at Mr. Fisher. "I say!" he whispered in hushed tone of awe. "This *is* stuff! I'll tell you what—I don't set myself up as a connoisseur—but if these aren't seventies, Mr. Fisher, I don't know *what* they are!"

"I sent up a bottle to the Rectory the night the Bishop dined. What was his lordship's opinion, 'Arry?"

"He didn't say," Harold, who was quite happy in the belief that the port was excellent, said. "He is very abstemious. I noticed he did not finish his glass."

The elder Fisher was silent in a minute's contemplation of the discouraging fact. "So long as no more of it was wasted!—" he said; it was hard to reconcile himself to the situation.

Aubrey Poole had come in, without changing, from a game of racquets, and was in white flannels, the dress which showed his graceful strength to the greatest advantage; his unbuttoned collar was loosely tied by a silk handkerchief, another was twisted at his waist, his brown throat was bare. He was an interesting talker; had travelled much, read much, was quick witted, full of apt allusion. He was never a bore, and would have been as unlikely to brag about his own performances as to wear a tulip in his buttonhole; but it was known of him that, besides being an expert in games and a valuable worker at his profession, he was a dabbler in the Arts.

Harold Fisher, preoccupied and a little glum, listened with a species of fascination to the low, glib

utterance, the mellow, harmonious laugh. Daisy, too, left her post of observation at the hedge to sit on the arm of the rector's chair, and gaze with her fixed, unabashed stare upon the handsome College master.

When the rest laughed, she did not laugh, being burdened by no troublesome sense of humour; did not make a remark, even, or obtrude herself in any way upon the general notice. Yet, sitting there by his son's side, she made a blot on the landscape in the eyes of Harold's father.

Soon he could endure her presence no longer. "Go in to Mrs. Fisher, girl," he said sharply. "Mrs. Fisher can perhaps find you something to do better than idling here. Go in."

The rector laid a detaining hand on the arm of the girl beside him. "Let her stay," he said. "She is always a quiet mouse;" and Daisy, slipping from the arm of the chair to the seat, established herself beside him.

"She's got something good to eat," he said, smiling at her. "I never see her that she's not munching. Come, Daisy, let's go shares."

He held out his hand, but Daisy shook her head. "All done, Cousin Harry," she said. The pockets of her loose linen coat were bulging with the contents of a big box Mr. Poole had emptied into them. She was afraid to produce any of the spoil lest questions should be asked. For the same reason, now that attention was drawn to herself, she felt it safer to get up and wander away.

"She's been at the sugar-basin again," old Fisher explained. "'Arold's right; she is always munching.

There's nothing else she can get at between meals. It must be the sugar."

He got up, in his fussy way, and went into the house at once to give Mrs. Fisher the benefit of his suspicion.

"She is a lovely child," Poole said, and turned his open, gentle gaze upon the clergyman.

Harold nodded, thinking of another woman's face.

"Personally I'm sorry to miss her from Jasmine House—but you did well to take her away."

"We shall see. I hope so."

"Two of the men there—personal friends of mine—dear fellows, I love them both—were bent on turning the little silly head. All young female things are silly—God be praised! I used to tell them it must be done, sooner or later; but they began too soon. 'Twas a shame."

"I think it was."

"But they themselves are little more than boys—too mad to hear reason. I could not always keep them in order." He stopped there, and shrugged himself, and laughed his soft laugh. "Now I come to think of it, I don't know that I particularly tried," he confessed. "It seemed the right thing to say to you, I suppose. What humbugs we are by instinct, Fisher."

"The girl's mother spoke to me about it. She wasn't very clear in what she said. I gathered she wanted her to come away."

"She ought to drop the price of her rooms a pound a week in consequence; I told her so. I like to see beautiful things about me."

"My mother is trying to find her employment of

some sort—a nursery governess's situation. Not a desirable kind of post, I'm afraid ; but——”

“The devil ! (I beg your pardon, but I'm sure you don't believe in him.) I have a lot of friends all over the world—if you leave it to me I'll ask some of them to make room for this lovely child. There's no especial hurry, I suppose ?”

The rector answered only mechanically, not thinking of poor Daisy,—whom his father at the moment was rating indoors, begging her not to put herself forward again, where it was not seemly for young ladies to be, when gentlemen visitors were calling ; favouring her with his ideas on the unbecomingness of a female of her age perching herself on the arm of a gentleman's chair,—thinking of Amanda Chatterhouse. He was trying to look at the man before him with her eyes, to listen to his soft, whispering voice with her ears, acknowledging his undeniable attractiveness with as little bitterness as might be. A man to enslave the eyes and the ears, if not the heart, of any woman.

Poole was still going on with the theme ; telling a story, now, of Rivers, a pretty curly-haired boy of seventeen, and a great favourite with the speaker, who had been with him on the Downs the other day, butterfly hunting. The boy had pulled out his handkerchief from his jacket pocket, and had dragged with it a photograph which had fallen, face downwards, to earth.

“Whose picture are you treasuring next your heart, Rivers ?” had been asked him.

“It's my sister, sir,” Rivers had answered, with his boy's overwhelming blush.

In his nervousness the picture had dropped again, as he was restoring it to his pocket, and this time the master had seen that it was the portrait of Miss Daisy Meers.

He had mentioned the story to one of the other masters, who had told him that he had in his desk six copies of the same photograph, the property of six boys of his class, confiscated on various occasions.

"It is time she went," the rector said. "I wonder if Miss Chatterhouse could help us?" The image of Amanda was so persistently present with him in that company he had felt impelled to speak her name.

Poole felt sure that among his own friends——

"But a lady manages these things better. If you will be seeing Miss Chatterhouse this evening——?"

"I shall not be seeing her."

"Or to-morrow? Or the next day?" the clergyman persisted. The least inquisitive of men, in general, he had an inordinate curiosity to know when and where and how often this man and woman met.

He got no satisfaction from Poole, who simply ignored the question. Daisy was no longer there to feed his eyes with her beauty; he didn't want to poison himself with old Fisher's beastly port, nor to bore himself with the companionship of old Fisher's son, now. A man he knew passed the hedge. He got up, smiled his friendly, disarming smile upon the parson, and with his gracefully slouching gait took himself away.



## CHAPTER IX

### TOPSY TURVYDOM

**I**N Wynborough on Wednesday afternoons the shops all closed at two o'clock. On that day, as soon as might be after that hour, and after closing time on every summer evening while the light lasted, the shop assistants repaired to a certain large meadow just out of the town, where, since the new rector's advent, four tennis courts had been established.

Here, or on the cricket-field adjoining, he was sure to be found. Here Amanda, acceding with a good will to his request, came often. Here, time going on, came, following the lead of Miss Chatterhouse, this and that member of the Set Mrs. Algum spoke of as "ours." They came with the ostensible objects of teaching the shop boys and girls how the game should be played; of encouraging them to an exercise so beneficial to them; of showing a friendly interest in their lives, and meeting them on a common footing of friendliness and goodwill.

They came, also,—but of this they did not talk so loudly,—to look on at the rector in his ridiculous fad of breaking down the barriers of class. They came because, since the mistake that had been made in the matter of the garden-party, it had become the fashion in Wynborough to run after the rector of St. Luke's.

Yet, in spite of the quite considerable number of people representing the superior classes who had enrolled themselves members of the Young People's Club, it might not have seemed to a disinterested onlooker that its promoter was any nearer the object he had in view. The wives and daughters of the College fraternity, the Set representing the professions of the town, the clerical Set of the quite immediate neighbourhood, had a habit of clinging together, and holding at arm's length the Young People with whom they had come to mingle. They could not lay aside their *de-haut-en-bas* manner towards the ladies who supplied them with ribbon and the gentlemen who cut them cheese.

In the tea-tent the "classes" chattered in high voices among themselves of their own concerns. They had in such a distant way accepted tea and bread-and-butter from the hands of the one daring young man of the "masses" who alone had had courage to hand it that he declined, laughing and good-humoured, to venture again. He was the very well-mannered, well-looking son of the very respectable principal innkeeper of the place.

"Take this dish over to those ladies talking in the corner," the rector had encouraged him.

"No, sir." He slipped his hands into the pockets of his immaculate white flannels, and looked with a defiant twinkle in his eyes at Harold, trying to push the cake-dish into his hand.

"Why not, Dick? Nonsense, old man! Take hold."

"Not if they were starving, sir. I'd face a few roaring lions if you wished it, Mr. Fisher, and if

'twould do you any good, but I won't face again the look Mrs. and the Miss Tofts turned on me when I asked them which they fancied, cake or bread-and-butter."

"Miss Chatterhouse is sitting alone. Take the cake to her, Dick, like a good fellow. You'll get only kind looks from her."

Amanda, in fact, received the handsome, well-dressed youth with so much favour, and it pleased her to enter into conversation with him so graciously, that it was with difficulty he could be torn from attendance on her when his presence was required in the tennis courts.

Where Amanda, daughter of a distinguished general, grand-niece and god-daughter of the first cousin of an earl, led the way it was considered safe to follow. Soon young Dick and his friends found condescending smiles and kind glances where they had been met by haughty stares.

But perhaps it was the presence of Aubrey Poole which worked more efficiently for the rector's purpose than even Amanda's gracious co-operation.

The holidays were come; the boys gone home; one by one the masters also took their departure. Poole lingered still. The racquet court, the fives court, the playing fields were empty, but he was always slow to move, finding himself so content wherever he happened to be that the motive power to leave was missing. He entered with facile zeal into the new rector's notion of fighting the tyranny imposed by the arbitrary divisions of classes,—he seemed so to enter, that is; but because of his habit of speaking with his tongue in his cheek, it was

understood by his intimates to be wiser not to take Aubrey's enthusiasms for what they seemed worth.

The others, when they "mingled," as Mrs. Algum expressed it, did not, in their most affable moments, forget that the act was a condescension. Poole—except that appearance, gesture, accent, voice, proclaimed him of a different world—moved among the rest as one of their own degree. Thanks to his gift of manner, his attractive smile, he had been ever popular among the tradespeople. When he joined them now at their games with an easy friendliness, an unflinching fund of humour, and, above all, an apparent enjoyment of their society which flattered them and won all hearts, he easily became a hero among them.

It had not been thought by one of the members that the presence of Mrs. Algum upon their playground or in their tea-tent would add to the general enjoyment. Those who knew her best were comfortably certain no power on earth would induce her to appear there.

"She'll be such fun! Let's get her!" Poole said.

And to the very next meeting, brought there by the exercise of Poole's arts alone, she came.

Well Amanda knew to her cost, well might the others guess, that there was about this man a magic when he cared to exert it.

"I do not approve this topsy-turvydom, you know," the new recruit said, standing before the rector and allowing him to touch the tips of her fingers. "I do not think that any good will come of it. But I am bound to believe it well intentioned, and I could not

resist the appeal that was made to me to give it, by my occasional presence here, my sanction."

From that epoch, with the title of the Topsy-turvy Club, the scheme leapt into favour. The name seemed to introduce that element of farce in which alone Mrs. Algum's set saw that the project could be regarded.

"Do come! We all go. It's such fun!" girls said one to the other. Of course they must be chaperoned. All those agreeable, unattached young masters having left the place for two months, there was rather a dearth of amusement to young females left behind.

And so at last the Club went swimmingly.

A little shamefacedly at first, and then with an enthusiasm that left caution and reasonableness behind, the ladies of his parish embraced the rector's other projects, and made slaves of themselves for his use. For he was a man whose personality told. There was such an earnestness about him, such a silent energy, such a passion of helpfulness, such a high-souled contempt for meanness and littleness, and the wisdom of small souls. His deep eyes looked out from beneath the over-hanging brows with such a gaze of fearlessness, steadfastness, truth, it was all but impossible not to believe in him, and he took care that those who believed were moved.

So it came to pass that, draper's son as he was, Harold Fisher found himself a Power in the place; but that with all his might he fought against it he might have found himself the Fashion.

It must have seemed to a few sober-heads and slow-bloods, looking on, that not only in the People's Club, but in the whole town the reign of Topsy-turvydom had come.

Those charming, steep gardens with their grassy slopes, their pergolas, rose-gardens, treasures of towering pine and flowering shrub, which the less amply endowed of the inhabitants, taking their Sunday walks, looked at from afar with such admiring eyes, were, one after another, thrown open to them as the summer went on.

Mrs. Ranking, passing Cedar House, the abode of Mrs. Tofts, saw that lady and her daughter walking there, accompanied by two of the young ladies from Regent House. On the next evening six of the employés of the same establishment might have been seen perambulating Mrs. Ranking's domain.

After which Mrs. Algum, whom it was impossible to out-do, issued invitations every week to twelve of the tradesman class to take tea with her each Sunday afternoon between the services. She was a lady who always followed an established routine, and one Sunday afternoon entertainment was exactly like them all. Tea was served on the topmost terrace outside the drawing-room window, a footman handing it round. Then for an hour the guests, still keeping their places, listened to Mrs. Algum's reading from an improving book. Afterwards a half-hour's walk in the garden, when any question they cared to put about the names of the flowers or the method of their cultivation, they were given to understand, would be graciously answered. At the expiration of the time Mrs. Algum herself escorted them (during the holidays when the College chapel was closed) to church.

"It's spoiling our Sunday—that's what it's doing," the shop assistants said one to another, with glum looks, when the invitations came. But it would never

do to offend Mrs. Algum, or the other ladies who were her friends; and the master tradesmen saw to it that no refusals were sent.

It was found to be absurd to receive people as guests in your house and not to shake hands with them when next you met them. This fact was uncomfortably felt for a long time before Miss Tofts—it was on a Monday morning after a specially stirring sermon at St. Luke's the night before—put out a daring, smartly gloved hand and grasped that of the assistant in the dairy shop who was waiting upon her. She had won a tournament at tennis with him the week before; and now, clad in white cotton coat and enveloped in white apron, he was about to take her order for bacon.

The news that the deed had been done spread like wildfire, the example being followed only to an extent. There were obvious drawbacks to the practice.

"We should have to put on new gloves each time we went into a shop," one of the girls demurred.

"Unless we kept a pair for the purpose?" another hesitatingly suggested.

A little awkwardness ensued. The young people behind the counters; the dress-maker's assistants, who opened the doors to customers; Dick French, who sometimes acted as ostler in the Salisbury Inn yard when the regular men were busy, not knowing if their hands were to be grasped or not. It was a small matter, but a cause of great discomfort all round, for a time; and was at length referred to the rector himself, a couple of ladies being deputed to consult him on the subject.

He, however, did not exhibit the interest in debating the subject that might have been expected, but treated it with an unlooked-for impatience. Maintaining a sulky silence while the deputation with natural volubility laid the difficulty before him, he could be got, in the finish, to give no more definite directions than were contained in the counsel "do as you please."

It was Mrs. Algum, ever happily inspired, who finally made the rule to which all the other ladies pledged themselves to subscribe. It ordained that while upon their business, dealing out sugar, fresh fruit, yards of calico, this form of salutation was to be omitted, and only used on occasions of encounter outside the business precincts.

"Look here; I don't often interfere with what you choose to do," the General said to his daughter, who had given him a description of one of Mrs. Algum's Sunday afternoons, "but I'll have you mixing yourself up with no such vulgar nonsense. I've got no beastly pride about me; I'm not exclusive, or anything of that sort; but I'll have no man or woman invited to my house that is not of my own class. Do you understand?"

"Perfectly," Amanda declared with equanimity.

"Parcel of rot! Who do you suppose thanks you for it? Should I be happy, and at my ease, seated at Parrot's, the butler's, table with his seven children and his maid-of-all-work, eating the family dinner? Why should anyone suppose Parrot would be happy seated at mine? I won't allow it—so there's an end."

"Wait till I ask you, father," Amanda advised.



She had made no overtures towards the hand-shaking, nor did she interfere with the liberty of the subject on the Sabbath afternoons. In the midst of the gush, for which he was responsible but hardly grateful, the rector welcomed the unruffled calm of Amanda's deportment, the sanity of her behaviour.

He had had a dream—what man who took seriously the teaching of Christ but must so have dreamed?—and he burned to put it into practice. It was a workable scheme he desired to promulgate. What was it but want of comprehension of the point of view which made divisions, and left man despising man? To know was to pity, pardon, succour, love. He had a head to organise, strength to overcome, eloquence to stir hearts; but he had not wished to arouse a quite reasonless enthusiasm, nor counted on a zeal "not according to knowledge."

With an infinite disgust he saw that it was not to the success of his plan, but to him and his gratification, that all these hysterical women were trying to minister.

"Is that what I asked of them?" he inquired disgustedly of his mother.

She smiled her wise smile at him. "Get married, Harry," she said. "Why don't you ask one of the Miss Tofts to marry you?"

Harold always shook off that question of his marriage, but it was one his parents loved to discuss. His father was disposed to treat the question of an alliance with the Tofts' family with scorn.

"Why stop there?" he demanded in his pride. "Let him ask Miss General Chatterhouse! She'd jump at him—even her—and set all his riff-raff flying.

For Mr. Fisher senior by no means approved the universal brotherhood scheme. He was very seldom present at the Topsy-turvy gatherings, and when there took care to fasten on to anyone rather than those among whom his walk in life had lain.

"I've had enough of them," he would explain. "Now, I'm in a position to look 'igher. As for 'Arold, with his levelling notions, I suppose it's nothing to him the trouble I 'ad to put him up above them all!"

## CHAPTER X

### DAISY'S CAREER

"**Y**OU have made some new friends, I see," Amanda said one day to Aubrey Poole. 'I did not know that our young man's papa and mamma were on your visiting list. I have seen you twice lately in their garden when I happened to be driving by."

"I saw you passing," he said in his sweetly tranquil tones. "I flattered myself you had done me the honour to come to look after me, Amanda."

Amanda grew pink beneath the serene gaze her own eyes eluded. "I suppose I have the right to evince a little interest in your proceedings, as matters stand?" she remarked.

"Your interest, darling Amanda, is the greatest compliment which could be paid me. It is my life's crown, in fact."

"Then gratify my curiosity on the subject of this new friendship."

"These old Fishers are the very dearest old pair. Come with me, one evening, and let me introduce them to you."

"Thank you. I know them already."

"They afford me, I do assure you, the greatest amusement."

"You used not to be so easily amused!"

"Old Fisher tells me the same stories of his son—his son's feats at school (before my time, thank God!), his triumphs at College, every time I go. He often tells me the whole thing twice, each time. Look here, Amanda, if I can get you to take the bet, I wouldn't mind laying a dozen of gloves against a couple of kisses that with a little encouragement I'd get him to tell it *six* times, in the same words, within a couple of hours. Come, now!"

"And does that amuse you?"

"The subject bores me a little, perhaps, now I come to think of it—not the dear old man. He rakes out that old rag of white beard of his with nails filled with garden mould, and jaws and jaws about his son. It's a beautiful exhibition of parental devotion, Amanda."

"I know how such would appeal to you." Amanda's lips came down at the corners. "How long is it since you have seen your own father, Aubrey?"

"Now, if you'd asked me that question yesterday I could not have answered it," he confessed, smiling upon her. "As it is, I am in the position to inform you it is two years, five months, and ten days. I had a letter this very morning from the dear old man stating the fact."

"And are you going to see 'the dear old man' these holidays? He is an invalid, isn't he?"

"That's just it. He thinks I ought to go *because* he's an invalid. Now, I find that the very reason why it's so much pleasanter to stay away. It's not that I'm not fond of him; but I hate illness, detest the sight of suffering. Chronic sufferers should be

put an end to. They're public nuisances, and it's kindest. When I see one my instinct is to stamp the life out of him, as I should out of a fly buzzing round without legs."

"I'm not an invalid, Aubrey, but you don't often come to see me."

"A day does not pass without our meeting; and you know our arrangement, Amanda?"

"We decided to keep our engagement secret for a time." Her face grew pink. "Now I am tired of that arrangement," she said. "I think it better for both that our engagement should be announced."

"Of course, if you wish it," he said equably. "Only I must, in that case, leave Wynborough. I told you in the beginning I would not be the centre of that fuss and bustle; and I won't. But I will at once send in my resignation, and we will then make proclamation. Come to the old Fishers' this afternoon, Amanda," he went on without a break, "and win that dozen gloves, and hear of the prowess of 'Arold.'"

"And gaze, at the same time, upon the charms of your landlady's daughter, I suppose?" Amanda asked him, looking away.

His eyes kindled. "Isn't she an exquisite child?" he asked.

But Amanda had turned her back upon him.

It happened shortly after this conversation that one of the younger masters spoke in Amanda's hearing of Aubrey Poole's talent as an artist. All his young colleagues admired, praised, quoted him; it was strange that among them all he had not one intimate friend.

"Ask him," said this man, who was also a boarder at Jasmine House, "to show you the picture hanging over his dressing-table at home. It is a head of Daisy Meers done in pastels, and is a work of art, and a most beautiful thing."

So Amanda, dwelling upon the matter, came to think that Daisy should be better employed than looking so distractingly pretty.

"Do you still want to find a situation for Daisy Meers? Because, if so, I know of the exact thing for her," she was presently saying to the rector of St. Luke's.

She further explained that some little children of an old school-friend of her own were being sent from India to live with their grandmother in London. This lady was anxious to meet at once with a girl of respectable belongings who would teach the children their letters, play with them, help their nurse to look after their clothes, and take them for walks; all under the supervision of the anxious and loving grandmother.

"She is a dear woman, with an extraordinary love for all young things," Amanda told the young man who had constituted himself Daisy Meers' guardian. "If you like to let the girl go to her, I promise you she could not be in better hands."

The fact that Amanda was interested, that the future employer was a friend of hers, went for much with Harold. He was in that condition of mind where the smallest matter claiming relation with this lady was of importance, and to be connected with her on any enterprise was joy. In an incredibly short space the arrangement was made.

Daisy, of course, demurred. She wished, the boarders gone, to spend what remained of the holidays at Jasmine House. She longed for a time of running errands, of rushing up and down the High Street, her hair once more in unfettered luxuriance over her shoulders. She wanted to be able to smile back at the young men who peeped at her over office blinds or out of shop windows. Mrs. Meers, too, who had been quite content to let her daughter remain under the protection of her distinguished relatives at Arden, tried to put obstacles in the way of her being sent from Wynborough to earn her living. She wished her, at least, to remain there until she had time to get her a new frock. But Mrs. Fisher had had the frock made in readiness, it was found.

"If she does not go at once Mrs. Spender will have filled up the place," Amanda warned the clergyman.

So the girl and her mother being of the order of women who pine and whine and grumble, but don't know how to get their own way, off Daisy was sent.

Then Mrs. Fisher, saying little of the relief she experienced, set about the business of cleaning the bedroom Miss Meers had occupied with more than her accustomed satisfaction in such tasks. She pulled down its curtains and muslins, brushed its walls, scrubbed its floors. Having begun at the bedroom, she did not stop there.

"Why, 't isn't the time of spring cleaning, Mother!" her husband remonstrated with her.

She admitted that it was not. She did not attempt to explain to him or herself the instinct-

ive desire to purify the whole place which possessed her.

In the Rectory, also, where Harold and his sister were not agreed on the subject of Daisy, there was a feeling of relief.

Amanda, for her part, attended the meeting of the Topsy-turvy Club with a more cheerful spirit. She would not have to look on, or to avert a disdainful head, while Aubrey Poole giggled softly over the apathetic attitude of the lovely "child" with regard to tennis, or exerted himself to rouse her from her general sluggishness and stupidity.

But if she had expected to enjoy a larger share of Poole's society, she was disappointed; for at last he had made up his mind to tear himself temporarily from Wynborough. He had half a dozen invitations from the fathers of old pupils: to join this on his yacht for a few weeks in the Mediterranean; to accompany this man's family on a fishing expedition to Norway; to go down to this one's shooting-box in Norfolk in time for the first; that one's moor in Scotland for the twelfth.

When he said good-bye to Amanda he had not made up his mind which of these invitations he should accept. There was nothing he hated so much as plans, he always said. To be tied down to a thing made him loathe the thought of it.

"No free man should be asked to say 'I will go here on the third, or there on the twentieth.' It is no better than slavery. I will write and let you know, when I get there, where I am," he promised; and asked of her where was she going?

Amanda too had been invited to Scotland. The



Donaldsons had been staying at the Wilderness at the time of the inception of Aubrey Poole's passion for Miss Chatterhouse, and had naturally thought that by inviting them together they were making two hearts happy.

"They have asked me too," she said.

Poole was charmed. "That decides it, then. The very thing. We'll have a delightful time together. What dear people!"

"Don't land me there without you, Aubrey. I'm not so infatuated with the Donaldsons' dearness as to wish to be stranded in the Highlands alone with them. You are sure, now, you want to go?"

"Look here! Give me a pen. I'll write at once and accept their invitation," he said.

And he did. But go he did not, for all that.

Amanda went, however, and was away for a month, not returning to Wynborough till the reassembling of the school.

## CHAPTER XI

### DAISY'S GRANDMOTHER

**T**HE sun shone on the quaint gables, the fair gardens, the broad river of Wynborough as cheerfully as of yore. Tongues wagged as busily, eyes brightened and lips smiled; women as charming, to some tastes almost as daintily dressed as Amanda, passed along the shady side of the High Street, or went shopping beneath its irregular roofs; the church was as well filled, there was no abatement in the zeal of his parishioners; the affairs of the Topsy-turvy Club progressed. Yet the hours and the days and the weeks of the last month of the holidays lagged interminably to Harold Fisher's thinking.

For, strive as he would against his slavery, struggle against the indignity of it, the heart and brain and spirit of the poor young rector were taken captive by Amanda Chatterhouse.

On his first learning the fact that she was promised to another man he had loyally set himself to blot the thought of her from his mind. Not till after much secret suffering did he acknowledge to himself that the task was a terribly difficult one. Never did he allow himself, cowardly, to whisper that it was one beyond his strength, and not to be accomplished.

He had heard with relief that she was going away. "It is my seeing her every day," he told himself. "It is because this and that trick of hers, with eyelid, with voice, with graceful white hands, is so to me—God alone knows why—enchancing, enchaining, that I must watch for it, must intoxicate myself with the delight of it when it comes. Let her go, and I shall be my own again."

But he found Amanda in the spirit at least as enthralling as Amanda in the flesh; and, the flesh being absent, the spirit was always with him. No hard work, no hard thinking, no sanest reasoning with his own mind could rid him of this haunting associate.

And so he laboured on; not losing hope, because it was not in him to despair for himself or others, but doing his work with the sick thought of Amanda throbbing in heart and brain. Eating her with his food, drinking her with his wine, walking with her hand in his, preaching to a congregation of Amandas, praying with Amanda's face coming between his and God's.

"How quickly the holidays were going!" he heard on every side. To him alone how cruelly they loitered! For all his hard work, his struggle honourably to fill them, how long were the empty hours, how barren the days!

He was sometimes overwhelmed to think that what went on within him was hidden even from his nearest and dearest who would have given their peace for his.

"How restful and pleasant it has been!" Ursula said to him when the return of the boys and masters

was near at hand, with all the increase of life and social activity the event portended.

"Everyone pities us for not having been away, but Harry and I have had a delightful time," she said on all sides.

He heard her, and nodded acquiescence, marvelling humbly at the evidence of how little the tenderest of us knows his brother's heart.

"And I have the insolence to stand up in the pulpit to talk to men and women, each with a brain, perhaps, filled in every cranny with a secret as engrossing as mine. Each with his own thoughts of things that to him have any meaning buried deep down in the dungeon of his own mind; each—how do I know?—with some aching longing unfulfilled in his heart, making all the rest null and void; words but empty sounds, life a weariness, the world a desert, religion a dead letter."

"Why, there's Miss Chatterhouse come back!" Ursula said. She was standing by the dining-room window to watch the passers-by. "Oh, what a nuisance it is! Now I shall have to call, I suppose! I thought she was gone for a month; it seems only about a week. How I do wish the people would keep away!"

The rector was writing with his back to the window and did not lift his head. "Has she come back?" he asked.

"Oh, she is crossing! She is coming in!" Ursula cried. "She is coming in, Harry! Now, remember, I can't ask her to tea, because there are no cakes in

the house. And the roses on the drawing-room table are dead!"

Amanda, who was quick to notice such signs, saw that the rector's face was white to the lips as he rose to greet her. Her spirits revived at the sight. Acknowledging, with inexpressible bitterness in her own heart, that against one man's selfishness and indifference she was now helpless to prevail, it was a salve to her wounded pride to perceive how with another her power was supreme.

She was not looking the brighter for her change of air, he thought. The fact that her beauty was a little dimmed, that her cheeks showed a hollow in their smooth oval, that her thin, delicately-curved lips shut one upon the other with the effect of compression, as if they closed upon some miserable thought which must never escape them, smote upon his heart with an added anguish of yearning.

"Have you heard of your protégée?" was among one of the first questions Amanda asked.

Upon this subject Ursula had a great deal to say. Daisy had not, it seemed, once written to Mrs. Fisher, who had been so good to her and put up with her for so long. The kind woman, for all her distaste, anxious for the girl's well-being, had applied for news to Mrs. Meers. From her she had learned that Daisy was very hard-worked, very dull, and not at all happy; but that she was going to try to stay on.

Amanda was indignant at the reflection on her friend. "Mrs. Spender is the kindest, most indulgent woman," she declared. "Miss Meers has simply to be with the children. There is a servant to do everything for her. But now I must tell you Mrs.

Spender's account. I heard from her this morning. She says the girl is good-tempered, and she raves, of course, about her looks; but she finds her untidy in the extreme, and she fears she is lazy."

"Those things," Ursula interrupted, "she should have been told. No one should have been allowed to take Daisy who was not warned she was both lazy and dirty."

"Ursula!"

"Well, Harold, call it untidy if you like. You need not look at me with that furious face. I am not at all afraid of you."

"Mrs. Spender is doing her best to improve her, and, as she was taken on my recommendation, to keep her," Amanda went on. "But—and this is what I came to speak to you about, Mr. Fisher—she complains that the girl is always asking to go out; and although Mrs. Spender is anxious not to deny her, and wishes her to have all reasonable change, she is greatly inconvenienced by the claims of her grandmother on Miss Meers' time. I thought, perhaps, you would write a word of warning to the girl on the subject."

"Her grandmother?" Ursula repeated with a wrinkled brow. "Does her grandmother live in London, then, Harry?"

Harry supposed so, from Mrs. Spender's account. "She shall be told to shunt the grandmother," he promised; and thanked Miss Chatterhouse for giving him the hint to do so.

He had not thought it desirable to mention the fact that he had received from Daisy a letter filled with complaining.

"Although Mrs. Spender calls me 'Miss Meers,' the servants all say I am only one of them. I do not wish to stay in a place where I am thought a servant. I can't make the children's clothes because I don't know how to sew. So Mrs. Spender says I am to keep them quiet and play games ; and I can't because they will scream, and their games are so silly. Ask mother to say I may come home again."

Instead of complying with this request, the rector had sought an interview with Mrs. Meers, and had impressed on her the necessity of turning a deaf ear on such complaints, and of remaining firm.

Mrs. Meers had wept, had said it was a hard fate for a child to be fatherless, but had promised to send her daughter the best of advice.

Immediately on Miss Chatterhouse's departure Ursula had gone out ; a fact which escaped the notice of her brother till, with an important face, and an air of not entirely displeased fluster, she burst in upon him.

"Harry," she cried, "there isn't a grandmother !"

He looked at her blankly ; for the moment hardly comprehending.

"I thought so, but would not speak till I was sure. I have been to ask mother ; she says both Mr. and Mrs. Meers were orphans when they married."

"Well, what of it ? Miss Chatterhouse made a mistake ; she probably intended to say aunt or cousin."

"Nonsense, Harry ! Now, listen. That girl is deceiving Mrs. Spender ; she is saying she goes to her

grandmother when she goes—no one knows to whom, or where."

Harold gazed upon his sister, so agreeably excited. There was a dawning of uneasiness on his face, but he said nothing.

"I am quite certain of what I say, Harry, and mother sees as I do. She is the most discreditable little wretch to be responsible for. And now, I should like to know what you intend to do?"

Tea had been carried in; the rector folded a piece of bread-and-butter and ate it thoughtfully. "I suppose I must go and see Mrs. Meers about it," he said, rather ruefully, at last. "If the child really hasn't got a grandmother it won't be pleasant news for her."

"She is just the kind of woman to swear she has," Ursula declared.

"My dear, you really ought to try to broaden your sympathies," the brother said. "As it is you are just a bundle of prejudices."

"I'm glad I am. I'm saner so. It's all very well, Harry, but for once I agree with father. He says it is derogatory to you to mix yourself up with such a set. He said so from the first. He sent a message to you, just now, and I really think you would do well to pay attention to it. 'Tell Harry,' father said, 'to wipe his hands of the whole lot.'"

"I suppose I must go to Mrs. Meers at once," Harold said, munching, meditating, not listening.

"Get your tea first, Harry. I told mother about Amanda Chatterhouse coming in, and that there was no cake; and she's sent some, the sort you like. She



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says I'm never to let you go without cake at your tea again."

The rector had turned his back on the tea-table and reached the door.

"Father 'll be in, in a minute, to see if you've eaten any, and to ask how you liked it. Harold, mother 'll be so disappointed——"

He came back from the door at that, cut himself a slice of cake, ate it solemnly, and departed.

## CHAPTER XII

### “WHOSO COMETH TO ME”

WHEN the Reverend Harold Fisher arrived at Jasmine House, and before he could ring the bell, the door was thrown open by Mrs. Meers, who, about to hurl herself forth into the street, was only stopped by the form of the clergyman upon the doorstep.

The young man had some ado to keep her from knocking him backwards on to the pavement, for she was a woman of ponderous build. People passing looked with astonishment to see the pair apparently scuffling there in the broad light of day, the mistress of the house uttering yell upon yell of affliction.

To hide the distressing sight, and to stifle the disturbing sounds, the clergyman pushed the lady into the hall, shut the door, and shook her off into a hall chair.

She had a disordered appearance. Her hat had been thrown, with no regard to its just or becoming position, upon her untidy head; her face was damp with tears and the dews of perspiration; her teeth chattered; her whole frame was shaken by some strong feeling; in her hand she held a telegram.

“I was coming to you with this,” she said, getting

out the words as well as she could for violent shuddering.

She held to him the paper in her shaking hand. "This is your affair," she said. "It isn't mine. You put her there. I said 'don't do it.' You put her there. Now she's lost—my Daisy—and you must find her. It's your affair. You interfered. Now find her—find her—find her—do you hear?"

Harold took the telegram, noted that it came from Mrs. Spender, was dated three o'clock that afternoon, and read the couple of lines—

"Your daughter missing since seven last evening. Has she returned home?" they ran.

"Daisy has perhaps gone to see her grandmother," Harold, without great faith in the suggestion, ventured.

"Grandmother yourself!" Mrs. Meers cried, with panting scorn. Her breath seemed to come with great difficulty, she was bordering, he saw, on hysteria. "She hasn't a grandmother, and never had. She is lost, I tell you. My lovely Daisy is lost. Decoyed up a lane and murdered for her clothes. I said it. I said it every day. A lovely young fatherless thing sent off like that on her own; and me not allowed to lift a finger to say to my own child 'you shan't go!'"

A sound of loud breathing and a scuttling in the background warned Harold that the servants were listening; he opened the door of one of the rooms. "Come in here," he said, and dragged in the mistress of the house by the fleshy upper arm. She dropped in a heap upon the sofa, her hat and head parting company with the jerk. She paid no heed, but loudly gasped and moaned, clutching uneasily at her bosom.

"My Daisy! My lovely child!" she cried.

"Hush! You will have the people in from the street."

"Let them come—come and welcome! Let them know whose doing it is. Who sent my fatherless child to her destruction!"

"Be silent, Mrs. Meers. Listen. You have to answer my questions, at once, and without excitement. Everything depends on it. Daisy herself—more than Daisy. Are you attending? Now, then. Daisy has been going out frequently, ostensibly to see her grandmother. If, as you say, she has no grandmother, what relation could she go to see?"

"None!" cried Mrs. Meers, almost shrieking the word in her excitement. "I tell you none!"

Then——" said the rector, but paused upon the word. Where was the use of putting the mischief into words.

"We mustn't sit still and moan," presently he said, speaking sternly to the poor woman. "You must pull yourself together, Mrs. Meers. We must do something."

"Do?" she cried to him. "And who should be doing, pray, if it isn't you that have brought the mischief on us? Do yourself! I say."

At the room in the Salisbury Arms, now called the People's Hall, a debate was to be held that evening which the rector had promised to open. He thought for a minute.

"I could get away by the ten o'clock train to London," he said then. "I could see the lady Daisy was with, and make inquiries. In the meantime we must wire to her. Give me the address."

Mrs. Meers was too bewildered to remember it; she was in the hiccupping stage of hysterical grief, and could not even speak; but she drew from her pocket a letter which Harold saw was in Daisy's sprawling, unformed hand.

"Is this her last? May I read it?" he asked; and the mother nodded assent.

It was the usual rigmarole of complaint, set forth in the usual incoherent way.

"He took me to a theatre Saturday afternoon," the rector saw near the end as he skimmed the pages. "I wore my green, and he had me put my hair down. He'd like to take me to the play at night if I could get leave, but I can't."

"Who is 'he'?" Harold asked, and held the sentence before her eyes.

She snatched the paper from him and turned back, searching a previous page, then pointed to initials occurring in an earlier paragraph.

"A. P." read Harold, gazing upon the letter. "Who is A. P.?"

"Poole," Mrs. Meers hiccupped. She thumped her chest for breath to speak. "Poole have always taken an interest in Daisy. He's got her picture painted from her photograph—done it himself—in his room." Something a thought more concentrated crept into her wild regard, with an effort she forced herself to speak coherently. "If you could find up Poole, now, he's the one that'd find Daisy. Poole'd never rest till he found her!"

Harold gazed at the mother in a moment's absolute stillness; then his lids snapped rapidly over scintillating dark eyes. "It looks as if Poole were the

man we want," he said. "I will do my best to find him."

When his evening's work at the People's Hall was over, the rector called again at Jasmine House. Another London train was in by that time, but it had not brought Daisy. The telegram sent to Mrs. Spender had but elicited the depressing fact that she knew nothing of the girl's movements after she had left her home.

Mrs. Meers had been put to bed ill, the servant told the clergyman, and they had sent for the doctor to her. The mistress had had the most dreadful ideas, and was screeching out that poor Miss Daisy was murdered and put in a bag. There had been no holding her.

"Tell her everything that can be done shall be done," the poor young man said. "Tell her I am going up to London to-night."

He was very tired with his day's work, and would have liked to be going home to his supper, his book, his bed. But it was clear something must be done about Daisy; with the mother so helpless, who was there to do it if he shirked the task?

He waited in the hall while his message was delivered, in case Mrs. Meers might have bethought her of any directions to give. The slipshod servant came running down to him there.

"Mistress is taking on awful," she said. The stress of the occasion seemed to allow of a shade more familiarity than Dirty Bella would otherwise have assumed. "She seized 'old of my 'and,"—here she stretched forth the thick red member to bear

witness to the fact,—“this 'ere 'and. ‘Tell 'm,’ she say, ‘the Lord bless 'm if he bring my lovely Daisy back. Tell 'm there's none so fit to go on the arrand as 'im that's Daisy's nearest and dearest.’”

The rector laughed when he got into the street in spite of his sick distaste of the whole business.

“Daisy's nearest and dearest!” he repeated. “I don't know that it's a position I exactly covet.”

He had only time to ask for some sandwiches to eat on his journey, to throw a few things into his travelling bag. Ursula, who had prepared a comfortable supper against his home-coming, was angry and disgusted.

“Going after Daisy Meers?” she echoed. “You? And why you, pray?”

“Because,” explained the rector, squeezing the water from his bath sponge preparatory to ramming it into his bag, “—because I am her nearest and dearest.”

“Are you aware,” he asked her presently, “that I stand in that relation to the lovely creature?”

“Little draggie-tailed wretch!” said the indignant Ursula. “I don't know how you can be so mad, Harry, as to mix yourself up with such dirty work!”

He walked the half-mile to the station, carrying his bag. There were to be only two or three passengers by that late train. The station-master came up and spoke to the rector as he neared the ticket-office.

“Little Miss Meers is safe home, then, sir?” he said as he raised his cap. For the news of the loss of Mrs. Meers' daughter had spread like wildfire through the town.

"Home?" Harold repeated, staring at the man.  
"No!"

"She came in by the eight-thirty, sir. She's got to her home long ago."

"Are you sure?"

"Certain, sir. See her myself."

Intensely relieved, a little on his own account, and much on the girl's, Harold walked away.

He knew that she was not at her home; it was possible she had gone to his father and mother.

There was no carriage to be had, and Arden was at a considerable distance from the station. The hour was late when the young man knocked up the well-ordered household, in which irregular hours were considered a reproach, and put his question.

The master of the house was indignant when he learnt the reason of his interrupted slumbers.

"Daisy Meers 'ere? No, of course not. Why should she be here? Don't let me see her here again! And why aren't you in bed instead of 'unting for her in the dead of night, I should like to know?"

"It is because I am her nearest and dearest," rose to Harold's lips, but he refrained. "Her mother's ill in bed—someone had to go," he explained.

Mr. Fisher had slipped his trousers on over his night-shirt to come downstairs; the night wind was chill and blew his long beard sideways, he had difficulty in keeping his candle alight. He felt justified in being angry, and Harold had spoken in a flat tone and had an appearance of meekness.

"Remember, she doesn't set foot in my 'ouse again—remember that!" the father said. "My 'ouse is my own, I suppose? I pay for it? Very well, then, it



isn't for such truck as that. And look 'ere, 'Arold. One thing more ; I've done a good deal for you, and sacrificed a good deal, and I didn't do it for this Meers girl, or for any of her low tribe. Understand?"

"Perfectly. But I haven't time now to discuss it."

He went away at once. Never in his life had he treated his father with rudeness, but there were moments when he was not quite sure of himself, and felt it safer to escape.

He was loath to wake up the people at Jasmine House, but felt that he must acquaint the mother with the fact that Daisy was in Wynborough.

To reach Mrs. Meers' abode he had to pass the Rectory. As he did so, turning his head rather longingly in the direction of home and rest, he was aware of a dark figure huddled in the shallow porch, leaning its head and shoulder against his door.

He pulled up sharply. "Daisy!" he whispered.

To make sure of her identity in the gloom of night he pulled her from the door. He had to call her name once or twice before she answered him.

"Daisy! Daisy!"

"Yes," said Daisy at length.

She drooped upon him as she had drooped upon the door, and he grasped her tightly, feeling that from fatigue or weakness she was strengthless.

"Why are you here?" he asked her.

"I came because I was frightened," Daisy said.

"Will you try to walk home?"

"I can't," she said. He knew that she was weeping. She sank more helplessly against him. When the door was opened by Ursula to his ring he had to carry her into his house.

## CHAPTER XIII

### A STILL TONGUE

THE fact that Daisy Meers had sought refuge at the Rectory in the dead of night was soon public property, as the fact of her loss had been. That the mother, poor feckless creature, was ill in bed at Jasmine House as Daisy was ill in bed at the Rectory was also known.

"Yet she isn't so very ill. I am not so greatly impressed by her illness," Ursula told Amanda.

Miss Chatterhouse had called, on the part of Daisy's late employer, for news of the wanderer and explanation of her conduct.

"She walked about, all day and night, in London because she did not know the way to the station," Ursula related, in a tone as if to say "you may take the story for what it is worth."

"Had she money?"

"She begged some of two gentlemen she met."

"What an extraordinary tale!" Amanda said, trying to read Ursula's thoughts behind her words.

"You'd have thought she'd have asked ladies first? Not Daisy!"

"Mrs. Spender is anxious to hear what account she gives of herself. She has wired to me for news."

"She gives none. Except that she was frightened."

"Frightened? Of what?"

Ursula shook her head. "Goodness knows! It is all we can drag out of her. She said it when my brother found her in a heap against the door. She said it again when I spoke to her this morning. I questioned her, and she went to sleep. She has done nothing but sleep, so far, since she came. The train got in before nine last night. She was wandering about somewhere—no one knows where—till twelve, when she chose to come here."

"Why did she come to your brother's door? Why must Mr. Fisher be mixed up in her affairs?" Amanda asked with impatience. She, too, thought the fact derogatory to him. It annoyed her extremely.

Ursula moved an aggrieved shoulder. "She knew very well what she was about," she said. "She wasn't too dead asleep to know 'twas Harold's arms she'd tumbled into."

Amanda's face flushed.

"He had to carry her in like a child."

"She was a heavy lump for him!" Amanda said. "After such an escapade I think it's time Miss Meers left off being talked of as a child."

She turned then from the subject as though it disgusted her, but put another question or two before leaving.

"Mrs. Spender says Daisy Meers was away all night. Where was she?"

"Walking about."

"Walking about in London all night? Alone?"

"She says so," said Ursula.

"What a ridiculous story!"

"You must not say so to my brother!"

"Nor to anyone, of course. And is she to remain here, Miss Fisher?"

"Not if I can help it!" Miss Fisher said.

Leaving the Rectory, Amanda encountered the rector on his own doorstep, about to enter. She had the satisfaction of seeing his face pale as it always paled at an unexpected meeting with her. She told him that she had been inquiring for Miss Meers, and was about to write to Mrs. Spender the particulars she had learned.

"The girl came to me," Harold said.

"Yes. Why?" she asked him.

She had put the question sharply, on impulse, but her lips curved slowly in the smile he loved to watch when at once he did not answer.

"Ah, why?" she repeated. "Why should I come if I wanted shelter, or comfort, or the touch of a kindly protecting hand? Yours is a doorstep at which you'll find me, too, crouching, one day, Mr. Fisher. Be prepared."

He forced himself to look away from her lips to the great hump-backed church across the narrowed road.

"If you came——" he said, and got no further.

He had slowly made up his mind that in Amanda's sight he must seem a fool. Speech from him to her had grown so difficult that a word here and there, a meaningless phrase, a sentence half completed, represented his share of their intercourse. When he saw other men talking glibly to her, the ball of conversation tossed lightly to and fro, he wondered; and was sickly conscious of the fact that when chance brought him to her side, if she did not talk for both

silence fell between them. What could he say that she could care to hear? That was of value enough to speak in her ears?

It was not now for want of matter he broke off, but for too much. If she came, indeed, a suppliant to his door——!

"If you came——" he said once more; and Amanda mercifully cut across the stammering speech.

"I hear she says she was frightened. Of what was she frightened, Mr. Fisher?"

"It is that I am going, presently, to ask her."

"And you think she will tell you?"

"Assuredly. Why not?"

"And when you know, for the satisfaction of my friend, will you tell me?"

"That depends. If I can I will."

Amanda smiled with mischief as she stepped on to the pavement. "Ah, don't trouble to do so. I don't think the story she tells will be worth repeating," she said as she walked away.

The difficulty was to arouse Daisy into a condition to be questioned.

"My brother wishes to hear your account of yourself," Ursula said to her many times, without drawing from the girl anything more satisfactory than the complaint that she was sleepy.

Ursula's mother came up, with a resolute step, and sat down determinedly by Miss Meers' pillow. For two hours she sat there. At the end of that time Daisy awoke, peered at her visitor through heavy lids and shut her eyes again.

"You have got to say exactly why you left Mrs.

Spender's. I am waiting here until you tell me," Mrs. Fisher said in a very determined and uncompromising tone of voice. "Also, what you did from the time you left until the time you came here. It is absolutely necessary for your own sake that this should be known. Do you hear?"

Daisy only closed her eyes the tighter; when the impatient lady bent over and shook her shoulder with a not very gentle grip, "Let me be! I'm so tired," the girl whined, and began to cry noisily, like a child.

Then the clergyman's mother, remembering her son had said Daisy was not to be badgered, grew frightened, and took herself away.

"After all," she said to herself as she passed out, "I don't know it much matters. Whatever she said I should not believe."

But when she had had about forty-eight hours of bed in the Rectory spare room, even Harold began to think that, however tired Daisy had been, she must be about rested now.

"Perhaps she is really ill," he said to Ursula. "At any rate, I will see her myself this afternoon."

An announcement which had the effect of rousing Daisy to make use at length of the warm water with which from time to time Ursula had plied her in vain. Having bathed her hands and face, she seized a comb, and, scuttling back to bed with it, combed her long curling locks there, and spread them carefully over the pillow on which she lay.

Ursula, who was a rather prudish young woman, was disgusted when she found that even now Daisy did not intend to get up.

"Are you going to lie here till my brother comes!" she asked with sharp displeasure.

Daisy said she was, and added the now familiar formula, "I'm so tired!"

She was surpassingly lovely. It was difficult to believe that such wealth of heavy tresses, such glow of youth and health in rounded cheek, such youthfulness and heavenly innocence of appearance could leave any male thing unmoved.

Ursula looked jealously at her brother when he came in, unable to credit how absolutely cold that charming vision left him. It was the youth alone—the youth and the weakness—of the lodging-house keeper's daughter which appealed to him.

He smiled with gentle indulgence upon the girl, smiling a shy welcome at him.

"A nice dance you have led us, young lady!" he said. "Do you know that I was on the point of going up to London to set Scotland Yard upon your track?"

She did not allow herself to be overcome with fatigue in Harold's presence, as Ursula saw, looking on with suspicious eyes, but she had never much to say for herself. A smile or a giggle, a hanging head, a wide vague stare, a pushed out, protesting lip—in these lay all the eloquence Miss Meers had at command, or required.

The rector, sitting in the chair beside the bed, put the identical questions already put to her so often. Why had she left? Where had she been? With whom?

Ursula, standing at the foot of the bed, her elbow on the brass rail, her chin on her hand, severely

contemplating the bed's occupant, saw her droop her head lower on the pillow, push her face deeper into it—the tactics she had seen employed before.

"I want to know, not for myself, but for your own sake, Daisy; that I may have something to say to all the people who stop me to ask about you."

"Tell them to mind their own business," Daisy whispered to the pillow.

"Just at the present you are their business, my dear girl. I am quite sure you have done nothing really wrong. I want them to ask, don't you see, because I want to tell them. Come, Daisy! why should you object to tell me?"

"Why couldn't she have told me, or mother, for the matter of that, without troubling you?" Ursula interposed.

Daisy looked at her, and then at the rector. "I wish to tell only you," she said. "I don't wish anyone else to hear."

Thus Ursula found herself turned from her own spare room—and by frowzy Mrs. Meers' undesirable daughter!

"You must have done something you are exceedingly ashamed of; and that's exactly what I expected of you," she said sharply to the intruder as she passed to the door her brother held open for her.

Ten minutes later she caught the rector in the hall as he came from Daisy's room.

"Well! What is all this wonderful mystery?" she asked.

He looked at her with a preoccupied gaze. "I am not at liberty to tell you," he said.

Ursula's anger rose. "Do you mean I am to put



up with this girl, and to be kept in ignorance of what she did before she took it into her head to come here? Then listen, Harry. I am, to an extent, my own mistress, remember, and unless I know, and am satisfied with what I hear, I refuse to remain under the same roof with Daisy Meers."

The rector had found his soft round hat. "Don't be an idiot," he said, and walked to the door. But when he had opened it he looked back at her. "Do you suppose I should wish you to remain if I thought it could harm you?" he asked. "Daisy has not been to blame. Mercifully, wit and courage were given her to escape a great danger. Any woman, I should think, would be thankful to know she escaped."

"Oh, dear me, Harold! Spare me that! Pray, where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I am going to see Daisy's mother."

"To tell her about this danger I mayn't hear of?"

"Yes. I shall tell her," he said.

His face as he went from the house took on the grim look it wore when he had a not very agreeable duty to perform.

## CHAPTER XIV

### THE TUG OF WAR

MRS. MEERS presented by no means such an inviting spectacle upon the pillow as did her daughter. The rector, not knowing in his bachelor innocence what was amiss, looked with distaste at the untidy head from which the hairpins had not been taken since the beginning of the indisposition, at the bed upon which the greater part of the owner's wardrobe hung or was flung.

The window was closed, the room airless, a limp, not over clean, hand clutched the sheet to the invalid's chin to hide the night-dress she wore.

In as few words as he could, but quite plainly, the clergyman told the story he had gained, slowly and with much questioning, from Daisy's lips.

"I tell you this, both because you ought to know, being her mother, and also that you may be prepared to turn this man out of your house should he be so hardened as to attempt to enter it again," he said as he finished.

He had expected, knowing the excitable nature of the woman, a wild exhibition of indignation, and was greatly surprised to find her receive the story with comparative calm; even putting in a word or two, now and then, in defence of the offender.

"I shouldn't have believed it of him—not unless 'twas from Daisy's own lips," she said. "The beautiful presents he made; and always so, as you might say, fatherly and interested!"

"He must not set foot in your house again," Harold said.

Here Mrs. Meers began weakly to cry. "The best of the lodgers!" she wept. "Spent more in a week, and no questions asked, than the other two put together. And always so gentlemanly behaved. I shouldn't have thought Daisy'd have acted so silly. If she'd gone back to her place instead of roaming about no harm would have been done. I haven't got any patience with Daisy!"

The rector was disgusted. "Is this man's weekly payment more to you than your child's honour?" he asked.

Mrs. Meers only snivelled in reply, vainly groping beneath the pillow for her handkerchief.

"I don't see, me ill in bed, how I can turn the man from his rooms," she said presently.

"Tell your servant not to admit him. What is easier?"

She found the handkerchief, mopped her eyes, sighed heavily.

"Mrs. Meers, I suppose I have your promise to do this?" He put the question in a note which she accepted as a warning.

Rather hurriedly she gave the promise, ceased to cry, adopted a conciliatory tone, and inquired for Daisy's health.

He reassured the mother on this point, but added that for the present Daisy would stay at the Rectory.

The vision of pretty Daisy in her pink-and-white loveliness in his best bed rose before him; the thought of banishing her to the stuffy, unlovely locality of such a room as Mrs. Meers' was repugnant. And there was a stronger reason.

"Why was it to me that you came?" he had asked the girl as he sat by her bedside.

She had turned her innocent gaze upon him. "Because you are kind," she had said. "Others are kind, sometimes, but not always,—even mother; but you are always kind. So I came to you."

The young rector would in no wise cast out one who came to him so.

"While she's with you my mind's at rest about the girl," the mother said. "For she's a fatherless girl; and I don't mind admittin' Daisy's got beyond me."

"I suppose, for one so young and—and unformed excuses must be made; but Daisy was, she admits, guilty of falsehood," he said reluctantly. "She told Mrs. Spender that it was to her grandmother's house she went, when in reality she was with this man."

Mrs. Meers' face grew red, her eyes shifted. "Girls will be girls——" she muttered apologetically.

"I see no reason why they should also be liars," the rector said. "However, for the present I will look after her."

Then he got up to go. "Shall I give one of your servants orders not to admit your lodger?" he inquired.

"Send Bella in to me. I'll tell her myself," she promised.

As, having closed the bedroom door, he walked across the landing, he perceived the untidy housemaid, already half-way up the stairs, dragging behind her a flat leather case. On it the clergyman saw, boldly painted in white, the initials A. P.

He stood at the head of the stairs and pointed an authoritative finger. "Take down that luggage," he said.

The girl opened mouth and eyes in astonishment, saying nothing.

"Neither the man to whom it belongs nor his luggage is to be admitted here," Harold explained.

Then a door opened behind him, and a soft voice called to the maid on the stairs: "Don't attempt to drag that case up alone, Bella;" and Aubrey Poole, slipping past the parson on the landing, ran down to the assistance of the housemaid.

"That you, Fisher? How do?" he inquired as he passed again, dragging the case behind him.

Waiting until Bella, relinquishing her end of the burthen at the door of Poole's sitting-room, departed, the rector entered there.

Poole dropped the case noisily upon the boards, straightened himself above it, confronted his visitor.

"You find me in rather a mess," he said; "but as I did not invite you in, Fisher, I don't apologise."

"You have made your way into this house without Mrs. Meers' knowledge," Harold said. "She is ill in bed, but I have her authority for saying she does not intend to receive you as a lodger again."

Poole kicked open the case at his feet; it was empty. He looked round the room with a con-

sidering air—Harold, his thoughts otherwise engaged, had not noticed that it was largely dismantled—going to a bookcase he began to empty it, flinging the contents into the empty case.

"I'm not waiting on Mrs. Meers' intentions, Fisher," he remarked as he proceeded with his task. "Bella is at this moment entrusted with a letter from me to her mistress enclosing a month's payment in advance, and setting forth my regret that I am unfortunately obliged to leave at a moment's notice."

He was so tall, so handsome, so graceful, his words so easy, his voice so silken; the clergyman with his glum face, his black conventional dress, for all his bitter contempt, might have thought himself at a disadvantage; except that he was accustomed as far as possible not to think of himself at all.

"Dust!" Poole said, and clapped two books together. "My things have been ruined with dust. Why Mrs. Meers continues to harbour that housemaid is surprising. As ugly as sin, and a slattern into the bargain. Have you ever happened to notice, Fisher, the shortness, in comparison with her height, of Bella's legs?"

"I suppose you know, Mr. Poole, that Mrs. Meers' daughter has returned to Wynborough? She has come straight to me."

"Has she indeed?" Poole exclaimed. He looked off two books he held without any affectation of a want of interest. "Congratulations. She is an extremely lovely child," he said, and flung the books into the case.

"To no one but me has she told the reason of her running away from her situation."

"And might one hear?"

"That she was afraid—of you."

"Of me! Daisy! Oh, I say!" he made the exclamation with the softest inflection of his soft voice, his eyes shone with amusement. "She is getting at you, Fisher."

"She has told me that it was to you she went when her employer believed her to be safely with—her grandmother."

"Her grandmother?" Poole repeated with his gentle giggle. "*Your* grandmother, Fisher!"

"She has confessed to me that your influence over her was such that she did not consider herself safe where she was constantly seeing you."

"Safe from what?" Poole asked sharply. He turned swiftly round from the bookcase and thrust his hands into the belt of his white flannel trousers—he wore no waistcoat—and looked at the clergyman with a suddenly threatening face. "From what?" he repeated, raising his voice. "You are making accusations in the loose way that is permitted to the cloth. You had better be more definite—Fisher."

"The girl herself was not definite. She did not tell me of what. But she had no need. I can guess."

Poole regarded him in a moment's contemptuous silence. "I am not responsible," he said then, slowly, "for the irresponsible and prurient imaginings of the parsonic mind."

Then he left the bookcase and began taking down the lower pictures of the many that hung on the walls. He looked at each with interest and affection, carefully dusting it with his white silk pocket-handkerchief.

"I suppose," he said, "Daisy, in her vague communications, forgot to mention that it was at her own and her mother's earnest solicitation that I took her about London?" He held closer to the light a little oil painting from whose heavily carved frame a tiny corner had been chipped. "The trail of the serpent! Bella again!" he muttered to himself. He laid the picture carefully down, and, lifting himself, looked at the clergyman, standing stiffly just within the door. "Now I think of it, it was not poor little Daisy but the mother who suggested that I should act the not altogether congenial part of grandmother when Daisy wished to go out," he said. "When you next take upon yourself to interfere in my business you had better be more careful in getting up your facts, you see, Fisher."

"I have facts enough to go upon," the other said. "You will find them sufficient to condemn you in the eyes of every decent person."

At the beginning of that speech Poole, his eyes fixed on a picture out of reach, had seized the housemaid's steps, standing within the door, and dragged them, noisy and protesting, drowning the clergyman's words, across the boards to the required position. Having adjusted the steps with some apparent difficulty, he mounted them slowly and with care. From the top his gaze fell as if by chance upon the man at the other end of the room.

"You there still, Fisher?" he exclaimed in apparent surprise. "You are good at waiting, my dear fellow. They should have kept you at the counter. Were you, a little time back, saying something?"

"I was saying I know you to be a bad and



unprincipled man," the rector said. "You are absolutely unfit for the position you hold. I will see to it that for the future no father innocently entrusts his young son to your care. I go straight to the Headmaster when I leave you. It remains to be seen if he thinks what I have to tell him 'definite' enough."

Poole came down the steps carefully, a large picture in his hands.

"You know, I'm afraid the poor Master will not feel much interest in your communication," he said. "The Master has already received my resignation. As soon as my place can be filled—the charming old man dwelt flatteringly on what a difficult matter that would be—I go. If you were in the College Set, Fisher, which, by the way, I have always regretted you were not, you would have known that fact among those more interesting but less authentic ones you have been at such pains to gather. And now, as I am pressed for time, may I ask you to defer any other communication you may have to make? I am busy, as you see, and dusty; and, moreover, am due at the Chatterhouses' in time for tea."

The clergyman's face changed. "I must request you, instead of going to that house, to leave Wynborough," he said.

With a grating sound the steps were again dragged over the boards to the next high picture. Poole ran to the top. "Still pestering, Fisher?" he said, not even glancing in the other's direction.

"I request you to leave at once," Harold said again.

"I can't, really," Poole said, as if reluctantly

declining a flattering invitation, his face grown serious. "You know, Fisher, or perhaps, for the reason before mentioned, you don't know, I am engaged to marry Miss Chatterhouse. Until I find a new lodging I am going to stay at her house. It is quite an old promise. I really can't."

The rector stood for a minute, still watching the pictures carefully lifted from their places, carefully dusted, carefully lowered. A feeling of impotency, of rage, had made his face white, his voice husky.

"I will see to it that General Chatterhouse knows the man his daughter is marrying," he said.

Then he turned and went away.

## CHAPTER XV

### A PIG-HEADED MAN

**W**ITH a lapse now and again, due to such accidental incidents as the Poole-Chatterhouse engagement, the subject of Daisy Meers bade fair to be of perennial interest in Wynborough. Why had Daisy run away from her situation? Why had she turned up on the rector's doorstep? What had she done in the interim?

It was clearly the duty of someone to make inquisition in these matters. Mrs. Algum, therefore, magnanimously resolving to overlook temporarily the heartless ingratitude with which her former advances had been received, decided again to call at the Rectory.

Ursula, always disposed to remorse for the treatment formerly accorded the good lady, was inclined to be very gracious. She would have liked, truth to tell, to talk Daisy Meers without restriction of volume or virulence. She would have liked to say—

“I hate being associated with the girl. She is not of my class. She is of the Goats, Mrs Algum, while I, you perceive, am a Sheep, or trying to be considered one. She comes between me and my brother, and spoils all that was pleasant in our lives; and I quite agree with you, dear, far-sighted, impeccable one, that we don't know what she did, or where she was that

night she can't account for, but are justified in suspecting the worst."

All this, and more, Ursula would have liked to say; but that the rector, hearing Mrs. Algum was calling, chose to sit in the room with her all through her stay.

He was stiff and uncomfortable in manner, and had a grim look about the mouth. He looked tired, besides, and had aged visibly in his few months of parish work.

When the topic was broached, solely to discuss which Mrs. Algum had come, it was the rector himself who started it.

"You have heard of Mrs. Meers' illness?" he said. "I am sorry to say she is very much worse to-day. The doctor now calls it influenza. She seems pretty bad."

Mrs. Algum, of course, was not surprised. She never was surprised at anything, being too experienced. Aubrey Poole, it appeared, had revealed to her the dirty condition of the house.

"I look upon it as a dispensation of Providence, Mr. Fisher, that the house must now be whitewashed, perhaps papered. At Westfields we always consider it safer to paper after influenza. And it is also providential that her daughter is now at home to nurse Mrs. Meers."

"My brother does not think that Daisy should be allowed to nurse her mother," Ursula said, the tip of her nose grown pink.

The rector corrected her. "It is the doctor who does not think she should be allowed to do so," he said.

"In this matter I should waive the doctor's opinion," Mrs. Algum said. She sat very upright, and drew her chin farther into her throat. "Her place is with her mother; and that she should be there is better for her, for Mrs. Meers, and—for you."

"Dr. Beart is of a different opinion," the rector said. "I am of a different opinion, also."

The lids snapped quickly over his eyes before he fixed them on Mrs. Algum's face. "There are, I believe, in Wynborough, reports prejudicial to the character of this girl, rumours likely to injure her for life," he said with careful distinctness. "I am in a position to assert that these are as false as they are cruel. Therefore I consider the place, at the present, for Daisy Meers is under my own roof. By keeping her here with my sister I am emphasising the fact that I am satisfied; that I know her to have done nothing of which to be ashamed. Since you are interested in the matter, I shall be greatly obliged if you will repeat what I have said, Mrs. Algum, and also give, on any occasion that may offer, an emphatic denial to such reports."

"If you are satisfied with the explanation the girl gave you, perhaps your simplest plan will be to make it public," Mrs. Algum shrewdly suggested. "A mystery is always a mistake. Clear up the mystery, Mr. Fisher."

"Unfortunately I am not in a position to do that," Harold said, with grimly held lips.

Mrs. Algum had risen to go; she smiled meaningly, but with ineffable calm, and touched the tips of the rector's fingers with her black suède gloves. "Good-bye, Mr. Fisher," she said.

Harold looked after her with a lowered brow. "Does this woman think I lie when I say I am satisfied?" he inquired of his sister, turning sharply upon her.

Ursula looked away from him coldly. "It is certainly unfortunate, as Mrs. Algum says, that there has to be a mystery about it," she said. "It seems to me that for Daisy's sake what there is to say should be said."

Harold's eyes sought the floor; he stood to study it in a moment's glum silence. "Daisy, you see, is not the only person I have to consider," he said then.

"I'm glad of that. I began to think she was," Ursula retorted pertly, nose in air.

He looked an angry question, while she gazed back at him with a kind of timid hardihood. Yet he and his sister had been until lately the dearest friends; and he was of an affectionate nature and coveted the approval of those he loved!

It was very uncomfortable; and as time went on Ursula was not the only one who made the discomfort of the position plain. Eyes that had grown to look at him so kindly during the summer months, looked shyly now. Ladies who had seemed to be at his elbow whichever way he turned, now, when rarely met, passed hurriedly on. To be sure there was now plenty going on in the place, College boys and College masters flying about. The Tofts girls were getting up some private theatricals—the proceeds to go towards a new organ for the church at Branksmead, three miles out of the town. Mrs. Algum, enlightened woman! had started afternoons with Browning; and

puzzled, poor ladies read portions of his works, taking so many lines by turn, in each other's houses. Night after night people were meeting, and trying to look pleased at meeting, the same faces at dinner-parties. There was a talk of a ball to come off towards the end of term at the Town Hall.

In the holidays it seemed that there had been only the Topsy-turvy Club. Its members were invited, the tennis courts being of course deserted, to meet, for a social evening, once a week in the parish room at the Salisbury Arms; but no element of aristocratic leaven any longer lightened the mass of workaday folk who alone responded.

"We have shown that we can mingle," Mrs. Algem said,—a good deal of conversation having for its topic matters unconnected with the poet went on at the Browning readings,—“but we must let it go forth that for the future we draw the line at Daisy Meers.”

It might be that only the opening of the College chapel made the difference, but Ursula thought the once crowded pews of St. Luke's looked sadly empty. She acknowledged the fact with bitterness of heart, and gazed at the lovely Daisy Meers sitting in the angle of the Rectory pew, where it was restful for her shoulders to recline, fidgeting and yawning undisguisedly through the services, with dislike and grudging in her heart.

As for poor Mrs. Fisher, who, whatever their shortcomings in her own clear eyes, must defend her children, in every moment of the day she was harried by his father's arraignment of his son.

"It's your own fault," the old man always finished by saying. It comforted him a little to nag at his

wife, and made the position for him bearable. If he could rouse her to defend herself and quarrel with him both were happier. "You have always upheld him in his foolery, and you uphold him in this."

But Harold knew very well that in this matter his mother even was against him. Everyone was against him. He was all the surer of his own position. Both his courage and his obstinacy ever mounted with occasion. He surveyed the situation with wide-open eyes of one who "hears the tumult but is still"; he put his back against the wall and set his face, knowing that he would not cry for quarter nor feel his heart sink.

At the Rectory the days seemed long to Daisy. Ursula seldom spoke to her, never set her tasks, nor sent her on errands. She avoided the mistress of the house, therefore, and hung about Harold as he wrote or read. When he went out she put on her hat as a matter of course to accompany him.

"Why don't you and Ursula walk together?" he sometimes suggested.

"I like best to be with you," she always said.

He was glad to find her of an affectionate nature; she liked to drag on his arm as they walked.

With Ursula she was silent, but to Harold she talked to the best of her ability, which was poor. She had a fund of small information at command: she knew whose servant it was chatting with the butcher's man outside the shop; how many children this person had; when that was going to marry; who gave the red-faced girl in the post-office the violets backed by geranium leaves she always wore in her dress.



When her companion, tired of such themes, told her something from the book he was reading, or related histories from his own experiences for her entertainment, she listened with respect, said "Fancy!" and "Oh, I say!" in the course of the narrative; when he stopped, the story being finished, roused herself to inquire: "And what happened then?"

She was not inspiring. But the rector, noting the glances cast at them when she was at his side, grew to feel that all the world was against them, he and she standing alone together. Thus, gradually, a spirit of comradeship grew up, and he became conscious of a desire to defend the girl, for liking, and for friendship's sake—warmer incentive than that of a stubborn sense of duty.

He was quickly made aware that he could not go, accompanied by Daisy Meers, into the houses of his better class parishioners; but on his rounds to visit the poor and sick he took her, until he could no longer shut his eyes to the fact that even here her presence was not desired.

There is no such stickler for class in the actual relations of Society as the poor man who theoretically wishes to demolish distinctions. The parson, the doctor, the master, must be a "gentleman" to be held in anything but bitterest contempt. Not only among the Algums of the community had the appointment of the old linen-draper's son to the living of St. Luke's given offence.

"What's he better than we?" the meanest trades-folk inquired of each other—the vendor of penny toys, the small merchants of apples and red herrings, whom

old Fisher from the eminence of his own superior counter had despised.

And even in a lower stratum of society, the chimney-sweep, the lamp-lighter, the road scavenger, felt at liberty to hold cheaply a parson whose father had been a linen-draper.

"What do *he* know? *He* ain't much," they said.

So that when Daisy appeared in the rector's train, bringing a can of soup, a jelly from Ursula's kitchen, the recipients felt an offence to their dignity, and took the gift with sniffings.

"Let him bring his rubbage here, and I'll let him to know!" one woman threatened.

She had a shrewish tongue; and to the virtue of cleanliness, laboriously exploited, she sacrificed all the rest.

She was as good as her word. In the course of time the clergyman appearing at her back door, the attendant Daisy as usual clinging to his coat-cuff, was refused admittance by the virago of the court.

"No; I'm *not* at home," she said, in reply to the rector's inquiry, called within the half-open door. She appeared at the aperture, a saucepan in her hand, and the damp cloth, with which outside and in she had been scouring it, in the other. "I'm a busy woman, and a clean one," she volunteered in her shrill, ear-piercing tones; "and if you find a speck o' dirt in my rooms you can tell me of it. I try to keep myself respectable, and my husban' and child'en into the bargain, and I haven't no time for visitin', nor yet for askin' no Mrs. Meers's daughter, nor no such a rubbage, into my front sitting-room. And so I say straight to her face, parson or no parson bringin' 'er."

"My good woman, you had better be dumb than use your tongue to such bad purpose," the rector said.

But the stream of Mrs. Slapp's eloquence was by no means exhausted, and a volley of abuse directed at the girl beside him speedily convinced him of the wisdom of cutting a hasty retreat, leaving the lady still vigorously whisking her cloth in and out her saucepan, having followed the pair to the entrance of the court, loud victor of the field.

Daisy told the servants at the Rectory of that inglorious encounter,—she had far more in common with them than with its master and mistress. The tale was speedily spread through the little town, and came to Mrs. Fisher's ears. She went to her son then, and wept before him.

"Harold, for my sake," she said, "let there be an end of this! Your father is beside himself with rage and sorrow. His pride in you is hurt; he sees your position weakened, and the consideration he sacrificed so much to gain for you thrown to the winds. I know you don't look at things as he does, dear. I know his ambitions aren't yours; I know how high above our ideas you have set your own——"

"Nonsense, mother!"

"Ah, you will never let me say a word of praise of you, Harry, and I won't bother you with it; but mayn't I ask you a question in reason, dear? Why should your father, and me, and Ursula, and you be ruined in the eyes of everyone for the sake of Alice Meers and her trumpery girl? Don't be angry. It is that she seems to me, and to all of us; and I want to be open with you. Am not I as much to you as Daisy? Tell me that."

"Very much more," he said; and Mrs. Fisher drew a breath of relief. For a certain dreadful fear had been growing in her mind, and the mind of Ursula, which they had not yet put into words.

"Then, think of me, Harry, if you won't think of yourself. There is no reason the girl should not go back to her home. If Mrs. Meers had influenza—and I don't believe she had, but was pretending for her own purposes—she is well now, and wanting her daughter back with her——"

"She has not said so to me, but quite other," the rector interposed.

"And why? Because she is an under-hand, low creature, that has plans and plots in her head for the sticking up of Daisy that you'd never suspect, Harry, but that I can see as plain as the nose on your face. And I want her daughter out of my son's house—I want her out!" she said with almost painful earnestness. "Aren't my wishes anything, then?" she asked.

"To me they are everything," Harold said. "You may be quite sure I would always please you, mother, if I could."

"He practically promised nothing," Mrs. Fisher said afterwards to Ursula; for she had left him on those words, understanding him too well and loving him too much to badger him.

"I could have told you that before," Ursula said. "There isn't on earth a more pig-headed man than my brother Harold."

"Ursula! I don't think you should apply such a term to your brother. I call him a firm man."

"Call him what you like!" Ursula said.

She had private worries of her own to embitter her in those days. Fred Wing, son of the manager, and himself clerk in the County Bank, in whom she had of late years taken a tender interest, had come forward to make an offer of his hand and fortune to the rector's sister. Like the scrupulously honourable young man he was, he had applied in the first instance to Ursula's father; and his suit had been summarily dismissed.

"Nice thing for 'Arold to have a brother-in-law clerk in the bank!" Mr. Fisher had said contemptuously to Ursula. "And you, 'olding the position you do now at St. Luke's Rectory, can look a deal 'igher than young Wing."

But it was Ursula's first offer, and she three-and-thirty years old. She agreed with her father that under the circumstances the alliance would not do, but she cried over the disappointment to Fred, of nights when she was wakeful in bed; and she pictured herself the mistress of a certain little house within his means which he had given her to understand he had in his mind; and sometimes, in a moment's bitterness, "If I'd only had myself to think of!" she said.

She was a sensible, unselfish woman, with a boundless devotion to her brother; and if, in some moods, she felt that she had been called on to make a sacrifice for his sake she would not, all being well, have grudged it. But now, when she saw him lowering himself in the eyes of those haughty ones who had been brought to offer him the hand of friendship, throwing his opportunities to the winds, and trampling on the benefits which had at such cost been secured

for him, anger was in her heart. She could not but remind herself that, for the sake of one who flung in the face of Society Mrs. Meers' bespattered daughter, she had been called upon to renounce her young bank clerk, against whom nothing of greater reproach than the word "respectable" could be breathed.

"Harry is ruining his reputation," she said for the hundredth time to her mother. "It's no use telling him so. Let him alone. He'd do it all the more. 'What am I that I should be afraid of that?' he'd say, if you could get anything out of him. To himself he'd be saying, 'Better my ruin, in their absurd sense, a hundred times over than the ruin of this child's soul.'"

Mrs. Fisher's bosom swelled. "It's fine of him," she said. "I'm proud of Harold!"

"Oh yes," Ursula admitted, "I'm sure we should admire him very much—if he belonged to someone else. It makes such a difference. Did you notice the church on Sunday evening? You know how crammed it used to be? Fifty people there—I counted. And that splendid sermon 'Am I my brother's keeper?' you remember. It made me furious that there was no one to hear it."

"There were the fifty," the mother reminded her.

"Yes. Old men and women; a servant girl or two; a few children."

"They have souls to be saved, my dear."

Ursula was willing to admit they had, but without enthusiasm. "I have often wondered if you were to see Mrs. Meers if you could do any good?" she suggested.

"I always did hold myself aloof from the woman, cousin or no cousin!" poor Mrs. Fisher said.

But, repugnant as the mission was, as time went on and the position did not improve, she made up her mind to interview the mistress of Jasmine House.

"Don't spare her," Ursula urged. "She is not a thin-skinned woman. Tell her it is more becoming in her to keep her daughter under her own roof. And don't forget to say that Daisy has behaved abominably."

In ten minutes from the time that Mrs. Fisher entered the doors of Jasmine House she was back at the Rectory, coming in upon the brother and sister with a hurried step and a perturbed face.

"Harry, I believe that Alice Meers is dying," she said. "May God forgive me for saying I didn't believe she had the influenza. It is killing her. She is asking for you, my dear. And, Ursula, where is Daisy? She must go to her mother at once."

"As most of the College boys, in strings of threes and fours, have passed the dining-room window within the last hour, I should say that is where Daisy will be found," Ursula said, who was not to be frightened out of her animosity to Miss Meers even by the threat of a dying mother.

In the indicated spot, sure enough, was Daisy. She stood with arms raised, her hands holding the sash above her head, looking innocently at the passers-by, making no sign. In all Wynborough was not such a lovely sight. Small wonder the seven hundred boys, and occasionally the forty masters, liked to look!

She went to put on her clothes when they told

her that her mother, who had been considered convalescent, had had a relapse and was now very ill again. She was not at all overpowered at the news, but showed an admirable calm. Mrs. Fisher accompanied her to the door of Jasmine House, and, returning, met the doctor on his way there.

In answer to her inquiry he said that Mrs. Meers, only partially recovered from her former illness, had caught cold. Pneumonia had supervened; her heart for years had been affected. He thought very seriously of her case.



## CHAPTER XVI

### "I CAME TO YOU"

THREE days later the rector of St. Luke's, sent for to speed with the prayers of the Church the departing soul of Alice Meers, found his mother had forestalled him at Jasmine House, and was already established at the bedside.

He did not like to see the worn and whitened look on the comfortable mother's face. "Why need you have come?" he asked her when she tiptoed for a whispered word with him outside the sick-room door.

"My dear, there seemed no one else. Daisy is such a poor creature; and, after all, I suppose there is a kind of relationship. But I wanted to say to you, Harry, it is all arranged about the girl. Someone must look after her, of course. I will. I have promised. Unless she speaks to you about Daisy, don't mention her. It is my business."

Daisy was standing at the foot of her mother's bed, leaning on the rail. She had gone back, in the days she had spent at Jasmine House, to the fashion of hair-dressing in favour there; her beautiful, rippled locks fell loose upon her shoulders and her breast. The white, lace-trimmed overall, under taboo at the Rectory, was again adopted; but for her maturing

figure, and a clearer defining of the features of her face, she might have been a lovely over-grown baby lolling there. Either she felt no grief, or grief had made her dumb and stupid. She offered no help, shed no tear, only stood there, silent, staring on the dying mother.

"The nurse is coming at last. She'll be too late," Mrs. Fisher whispered. "For all the use Daisy is in a sick-room she might as well not have been here."

Daisy heard, and turned her wide stare upon the speaker. "Kneel down," Mrs. Fisher authoritatively whispered.

But the rector as he passed the girl laid his hand for an instant on her head. "Poor little Daisy!" he said; and Daisy felt hurriedly for the handkerchief in her dangling pocket.

"Perhaps," said Mrs. Fisher afterwards to Ursula, "at last she was crying. Perhaps," she added, "she wasn't."

When the prayers were over it was evident to all that the end was very near. Mrs. Fisher moved from the bedside and gave her place to Daisy. "You're more to her than I am; hold her hand; let her see you to the last" she whispered.

Daisy complied with a slow acquiescence, probably only her dumb way of showing her grief. But when the clergyman moved as if to go she turned a frightened look upon him, which he construed into an appeal to him to stay.

"My dear, I will not leave you," he said.

So for an hour the three sat in silence to watch the unconscious woman's struggling breaths. When

the last was noisily expelled Mrs. Fisher led Daisy away.

She was a tender woman, and not unsympathetic. The girl was young, helpless, lovely, and had just been rendered motherless; the situation, Harold's mother knew, should have been poignant. She was shocked that, even in such a moment, her heart was hardened against the orphan. It was, none the less, filled with anger and bitterness that in this matter of her distasteful cousin's daughter circumstances had been too strong for her and forced her unwilling hand.

Of such feelings she was heartily ashamed. Of such the beloved Harold, she knew, could not approve.

He had followed her and her charge into the little back sitting-room, where those few words had been spoken which had hung Mrs. Meers' daughter for ever about his neck. Daisy was pale and heavy eyed. She drew away from Mrs. Fisher and went to sit in the chair which had always been hers, opposite her mother's, by the hearth.

"I have promised your mother to look after you, and to do the best I can for you, Daisy," Mrs. Fisher said. "Should you like to go home with me at once, or shall I leave you here for a time?"

"I don't wish to go home with you," Daisy said heavily; and Mrs. Fisher, who had before her the task of reconciling her husband to the step she had taken in the matter, was conscious of relief.

"My things are at the Rectory. I can go there," Daisy said.

"Your things will be fetched to my house. I will

see to all that. When you leave here you will come, for the present, at least, straight to me," Mrs. Fisher said in a tone of sharp finality.

She tried to make up her mind to kiss the girl as she thus offered her a home. She even made a step towards her to do so; but her repugnance was too strong. "It is terrible of me, but I can't," she said to herself; and presently went away, her son by her side.

"I don't know what your father will say!" she said with foreboding as they took their way down the High Street.

"I can't see why he should so much object," Harold said; the subject filled him with an impatience he with difficulty restrained. Why could not everyone look at the matter reasonably, as he did? "Daisy is a most affectionate-natured girl. She will take the place of a daughter in your house."

"My dear, no thank you! I don't wish for any daughter with such a history as Daisy Meers!"

"You ought not to say that, mother!" he said severely. "There are reasons why I can't tell you the whole story; but haven't I given you my word that Daisy has done nothing discreditable? Surely you can believe me? She grew frightened, and ran away before any harm was done."

"You told me, dear. I quite believe it. But, Harold, I should not like my daughter to have a history of that kind—even if she had had the wit to run away."

"Then why have you taken this responsibility?" Harold asked. But he knew it had been done to lift it from his own shoulders. He was so constituted as

to feel at once gratitude for the devotion which had prompted the act and resentment that, even in such a fashion, the exercise of his free-will should be crippled.

"Shall I come in and help you with my father?" he said.

But she would not allow him. "I think when I have talked to him your father will see things as I do," she said. And Harold knew well the argument which would be brought to bear.

The rector left his mother at the door of Arden with dissatisfaction in his heart. It did not please him that the burthen he had chosen for his own should be borne on another's shoulder. He was, without knowing it, of a pugnacious disposition, and not at all unwilling to fight the world alone. It was not agreeable to him, much as he loved her, that the necessity for battle should be removed by his mother's management.

His recent experience of the fickleness of popular favour, the wound his heart had received, the never satisfied, unceasing desire for what was and must be denied him, had rendered him less than ever in love with a Society which could give him no pleasure, with its laws which irked him. The patience he was bound to preach to others he was far from feeling at present. He might endure, but he could not accept with gratitude the fate of his love. A bitterness he tried not to acknowledge to himself was within him, and no desire to conciliate.

A lot of cackling, silly women of this custom-straitened place, and men who while they laughed at them lived outwardly in accordance with their

foolish whims, permitting themselves only, as sop to their superior reason, the fact that they did so with the tongue in the cheek,—these had said: "You must not do this thing; you must not make the cause of this maligned and pretty child your own. Because she is pretty, in the first case; because she is a girl-child, in the second place; because *we* say you must not, above all."

Then he would give them the lie. He would do it.

And here was his old mother, whom he loved, but who also had been against him in this, defeating him by means of a sacrifice he admired but did not wish to accept.

His heart was touched, but he was not pleased with the situation.

He was sitting in his study that night, Ursula having left him for bed, his pipe in his mouth, the book he had read while his sister had been present closed in his hand, when the door opened very softly and Daisy Meers came in.

The night was wild and wet; she had come through it unprotected; her muslin pinafore hung damply about her, in her disordered, resplendent hair the raindrops glistened. She shut the door carefully, came round the table, and stood before him on the rug.

"I daren't stay there any longer—with mother—now she's dead," she said, and began to cry. "I'm afraid of people—when they're dead. The nurse sent me up to sleep in the room next to mother's. I'm frightened to sleep there. I came to you."

"You might, at least, have put a cloak on," he said. "Anyone who saw you out to-night in that white, flimsy thing must have thought you mad."

Ursula herself might have said that, he reflected. Ursula, who cared what people thought !

She only sobbed in answer.

"As you've come, and as you're wet," he went on, "the best thing you can do is to drink a glass of wine and go to bed."

He got up to fetch the wine, waited while she drank it, sat down again in his chair.

How could a man be anything but tender to one whose only fault was to be too childish-foolish for this hard world? Harold's heart was all softness for her helplessness and grief. The fact that all she knew in her simplicity was to fly to him made a claim on him he found irresistible.

She stood before him, wet, forlorn, a piece of her pocket-handkerchief twisted into a damp wisp, caught within her teeth, her chin chucking upwards every now and then with the spasm of her spent sobbing. His mother had complained that the girl had not natural affection, and asserted she had not even grieved for her mother's death. The rector welcomed the sniffings and chokings as proof that his mother was wrong.

He was used to the attempt to comfort the afflicted ; with those who were bruised and broken-hearted he had a very gentle way. Daisy made no response to the words that fell so kindly and distinctly from his lips ; only bit her handkerchief, sobbed with convulsively chucking chin.

"As for yourself, Daisy," he finished, "you will

have, in my mother, a friend who will be constant and true and kind. In her home——"

"I don't want to go there," Daisy interrupted. "I want—want to stay here—with you."

"I'm afraid, without offending my mother, you can't," he told her. "After all, Daisy, she is a better friend than I can be, for a girl; her house is more suitable than mine——"

"I don't want to go there. I don't want to be turned away from here—where I was happy. I want to stay with you."

"Go to bed, and we will talk over it to-morrow," he promised her. "To-morrow, Daisy, 'will be another day.' We'll leave all for to-morrow."

She moved as if to obey him, then fell on the floor at his feet, crouching there, her hands clasped about his knees, a tear-wet face lifted to his.

"I won't go till you promise," she sobbed. "I'll kneel here all night. No one else is kind. Let me stay with you. Cousin Harold, promise not to send me away."

Her battle was half won already, through his dogged preference for his own way, and his inveterate dislike to being made to go other people's. The tears, the clinging to his knees, the simplicity of the girl's faith in him completed the conquest.

"Promise me," she kept choking forth.

And of course he promised.



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE RECTOR INSISTS

THE rector of St. Luke's had said to Aubrey Poole that with the story Daisy Meers had told him he would go to General Chatterhouse. At the moment he had meant to do so, yet (perhaps because he itched to carry out the threat) from day to day put off the task. Had he undertaken it because his duty and the welfare of Amanda demanded it, or from his own passionate love and passionate grudging, and the desire to upset what to him was a dreaded consummation?

His acquaintance with General Chatterhouse was very slight, but he had not formed a high opinion of that gentleman's judgment or his caution. Whence derived he hardly knew,—perhaps he had heard it in the gossip of the town, perhaps read between the lines of some careless, bitter jesting of Amanda's,—he held the notion that the General would not be sorry to be rid of the expense entailed, and the restraint imposed on him, by his only child. He knew that the husband she had chosen was of good birth, that he had already an income independent of that he derived from his profession, and would at his father's death inherit a not inconsiderable fortune.

To such a father, with such aims, the story Harold

had to tell, standing on such an authority, might not seem to justify the telling; would not, almost certainly, be the monstrous bar to the marriage it appeared to the clergyman. The more he thought of repeating it in such ears the more clearly he saw he would be putting himself in the position of one who blackened a man's character without the chance of saving Amanda or preventing the marriage.

He was still debating the difficulty in his own mind, having only, so far, arrived at the conclusion that he would, at any rate, do nothing while suffering from his own first rage of disgust and indignation, when, on a certain Sunday evening, he discovered Aubrey Poole for the first time among his congregation. It was in the minute's pause between the singing of the hymn and the beginning of his sermon, that his eyes, moving over the congregation he was about to address, fell on the darkly handsome face, the long, loose-limbed form of Amanda's lover.

"In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost—Amen," said the preacher; and the sermon began.

When it was over, the occupants of the Rectory pew waited, as their custom was, for the clergyman to join them. Poole waited too, until the last members of the congregation were filing through the door, before he arose, and with a long look in the face of Daisy Meers turned and walked down the aisle. With a carefully leisured step he went, almost as if bent on showing someone there that he was not afraid to linger. Looking back from the great west door he saw the rector, divested of surplice but still in his cassock, accompanying his sister and Daisy to the

north door, immediately opposite to the Rectory across the road.

In his cassock still, and bareheaded, the clergyman made his hurried way over the flat-laid tombstones and the rank grass of the disused churchyard, and was standing beneath the lamp at the great gate as the tall College master came through.

"Mr. Poole," Harold said, "I wish to say to you that I have not yet carried out the intention I had to speak to General Chatterhouse on the subject of which you and I lately talked."

"Really?" the other inquired in the tone of polite regret. "Come in to supper at the Wilderness to-night—they have it at nine o'clock, and generally something toothsome to compensate for the disagreeables of the day—and tell him then."

"I have changed my mind about the wisdom of going to the General with what I have to say. It is Miss Chatterhouse herself whom the story concerns——"

"Come in and tell her, Fisher. She has been pitching into me this afternoon for being a dull companion. Your little stories will amuse her."

"I have followed you out of church to say it is Miss Chatterhouse herself who must be told the true history of Daisy Meers' return to Wynborough——"

"According to the word or two of gossip I have heard, there is no one in a better position than you yourself to tell it, Fisher. Beastly night, isn't it? I'm due in my stall at chapel for prayers. Sorry I can't stop talking any longer."

"It is you who will have to tell Miss Chatterhouse, Mr. Poole. And at once. I insist upon it."

Poole had made a step forward, but he stopped short and looked down at the clergyman, upon whose smooth bare head and pale face the light of the lamp over the iron gateway was shining.

"Insist?" he repeated, and his voice and manner changed. "*You* insist? You give yourself airs, Mr. Parson, Counter-jumper, Mountebank! This is insufferable. I hardly know by what right you dare address a gentleman at all. For the future I forbid you to speak to me."

He walked on then, and the clergyman walked for a few steps beside him.

"I insist," he said again. "Moreover, in some fashion which you yourself can devise, I will be satisfied that Miss Chatterhouse has been told. Failing that, I go to her with the story myself, and I take Daisy Meers with me to corroborate it."

"Don't be absurd, little man. Get out of the way," Aubrey Poole said.

It was by the next evening's post that a letter came to the Reverend Harold Fisher in Miss Chatterhouse's handwriting.

"There is something about which I particularly wish to speak to you. Could you come in to tea to-morrow afternoon at four?" she wrote.

He did not wait for four o'clock and tea, but walked to the Wilderness before noon of the next morning.

Amanda came to him from the garden, leaving the gentleman, with whom she had been walking there in the sunshine of late autumn, alone. That aureole of waved hair of a fairer shade than the rest

of the brown had been lifted from her forehead by the wind; her cheeks were reddened, her eyes shining. There was a glitter of excitement in them she forgot to let their lids hide. She was looking younger instead of older than her years, this morning, and was wearing a becoming frock of white woollen with no outer garments.

She took up her place by the fire when she had shaken hands with her visitor. "It looks sunshiny and nice out-doors," she said, and glanced to where Poole, cigarette in mouth, bareheaded, walked the gravelled ways; "but, ugh! I am chilled to the bone."

She rattled a poker energetically between the bars of the grate, and sat down. He could almost have fancied her, who was, it had ever seemed to him, supremely mistress of herself, ill at ease.

"Ah, I wish you had not come so soon!" she said, and seemed to smile as if claiming his indulgence.

"I hope I have not interrupted you, Miss Chatterhouse?" He had carefully moved his chair so that he could the more easily avoid seeing the tall white-clad figure beneath the bare trees in the garden. (Because the white flannels were undoubtedly becoming to him Poole chose to wear them, in and out of season, and on most occasions.) "You said you had something to say. I thought the sooner the better."

"I wrote to you on the moment's impulse. It seemed the right thing to do—yesterday; but now I've slept on it—I'm not so sure. I think perhaps you will be angry, Mr. Fisher?"

"I promise you I will not."

"It is—something—about—someone—you take a deep interest in," she went on reluctantly. "Someone against whom you won't believe a word."

He folded his arms as he listened, leant forward with them upon his knees and looked with seeming intentness at the carpet beyond his feet.

"It is about Daisy Meers," she said, and waited to be encouraged.

"It is no business of mine you will say," when he still stared upon the carpet and did not speak, she went on. Then swiftly changed her manner. "At least, I hope you will say so. I do hope, Mr. Fisher, you will say something!" She got up and again created a diversion with the poker, then stood by the fire looking down upon him. "To maintain, even before I begin, that horrid condemnatory silence is to take a mean advantage."

"What makes you say my silence is condemnatory?"

"You should see your face! It is the face of a man inwardly invoking all the curses of the Church on frivolous, gossip-loving, scandal-mongering woman."

"Miss Chatterhouse!"

She laughed. "I'm not frightened a bit, really," she said. "I only wanted to gain time for a moment's thought; to decide, after all, if I'd tell you. I've decided I won't."

He was standing on the other side of the fireplace, facing her now. She was a tall woman, and he only a middle-sized man; they looked levelly into each other's eyes. As if he had not even heard what had come after that announcement.

"You have something to tell me of Daisy Meers?" he repeated.

"Something Mr. Poole told me. I said you were the person who should know, and he agreed. 'Send for him at once and tell him,' he said."

"Here I am."

"It is to warn you that these two people—the Meers—are untrustworthy. Mrs. Meers actually wrote to Mr. Poole—he showed me the letter—telling him the girl was unhappy in her situation, and begging him to take her about, and so on, to cheer her up. Aubrey has known the girl since she was a tot of eight years or so, and thinks her so lovely. As all men do, I find."

She waited, looking a question he did not think it worth while to answer.

"Of course he took her. What good-natured man would not?" The colour in her face deepened, she turned away to touch the ornaments on the mantel-piece. "You have constituted yourself the girl's guardian, I hear, Mr. Fisher; I wished you to know this, and to know that she was with Mr. Poole on that last night."

He did not help her with her difficult task by a movement or a sound. In a moment she went on with her story.

"He was calling a hansom, as usual, to take her home after the theatre, or music-hall, or wherever it was they went——" she broke off abruptly. "I asked no question—it is no business of mine."

"You really think so?"

She gave him a swift glance, and looked away again. "I do not choose to make it so."

"Ah!" he breathed.

He changed his position and looked down into the fire. "Mr. Poole was calling a hansom——?" he reminded her.

"And your protégée gave him the slip. That is all I know, Mr. Fisher—all Aubrey knows. Now I have done with it. We both thought it better to tell you."

"I am much obliged to you—both. I knew it all before. Daisy told me herself."

She turned indignantly upon him. "Then, surely you might have spared me the recital!"

"I wished to hear it from your lips, Miss Chatterhouse. It concerns you. I wished to make sure you knew."

She waited, looking intently at the ornaments she was fingering. "Is there anything else I should know?" she asked in a falling voice. Then stopped him quickly when he would have spoken. "If there is, I do not wish to hear," she said. "I have had enough. I am content."

She went hurriedly to the window and called to Poole. He came at once; in his hand a little bunch of loose-leaved pink roses he had gathered from a protected wall. He looked in at the clergyman standing up with his back to the fire, but did not acknowledge his presence.

"I have told Mr. Fisher, Aubrey," she said. "But we might have spared ourselves the pains. He knew already."

"Aren't these roses charming?" Poole asked. He separated one from the bunch with the lingering touch of one who loved the flowers, and held it to



her. "The rest are for me," he told her. "I can't spare you another, Amanda. They're the last in the garden."

"Here is Mr. Fisher, Aubrey."

"As I see. When you have done with him, come out. The morning's too fine to lose." He smiled at her and walked away.

As she turned from the window, the rector came forward to make his adieu. Her face had flushed at the rudeness put upon him, but she did not blunder into an attempt to excuse it.

"I am so sorry to have troubled you for nothing," she said as she gave her hand.

"If you call it nothing, Miss Chatterhouse!"

"You believe I have not spoken for the sake of any womanish spite against this pretty Daisy? You will believe I had a better motive?"

"I know as well as you why you have spoken; and I thank you," he said. He might have added truthfully he knew even better than she.

When he had reached the door she spoke his name, and waited, forcing him to turn and look at her.

"You had a rather high opinion of me once, had you not?" she asked him, her lip twisted in a little smile that dwelt in his memory as one of hidden pain. "You'll have to readjust all your ideas concerning me, won't you? You thought that I had pride and courage and spirit, perhaps? You find me without a grain of one of the three. Nothing in my composition, you see, but rank, rank foolishness, and cowardice and vanity."

He looked at her for a minute in silence, standing before her, then turned again to the door.

"Good-bye," he said.

He walked quickly away from the abode of Amanda Chatterhouse, the burden of unhappiness he had borne to her door increased a hundredfold. She knew, and she did not care!

She was a woman of the world, not an ignorant young girl. He had known by a thousand signs that the inner meaning of the story she had in such a few words reluctantly told was by no means hidden from her. With her eyes open she meant to stick to her choice.

To think that for such a worthless wretch such a woman should feel such a love!

## CHAPTER XVIII

### THE TOLLING OF A BELL

**I**T was a cold and wet November, and influenza ran rife in town and College. Unfortunately in many cases, as in that first case of Mrs. Meers, it was followed by pneumonia. The Sick-house was full of boys; half the masters were sufferers. Those at present escaping went about with solemn faces, doing the work of their sick colleagues as well as their own. Meeting in their minished numbers in Common Room to dine, they looked askance at the vacant places and suspiciously in each other's faces. Who would be the next victim?

Aubrey Poole amused Amanda and the General, over their dinner, with graphic descriptions of the day's incidents: the dwindled classes of coughing, wheezing scholars; the masters teaching in caps and mufflers, and dining in Common Room in rugs and greatcoats. He showed with excellent mimicry how, when one among them blew his nose or shivered, his neighbours looked at him, darkling, and moved as far as possible away.

"What is there in the schoolmaster's profession that turns men into molly-coddles?" he inquired. "Suppose a man gets ill?—suppose he dies? Well!" he shrugged his shoulders with graceful care-

lessness of life. "These men are frightened as sheep."

The General, who had been a brave soldier, but who remembered what it was to be frightened, had little to say.

"A thing isn't so bad when it comes," he explained. "It's the expecting it that's the devil."

Amanda, the untried, had of course no tolerance for cowardice in any shape. She and Poole made merry over the terrors of Mr. Algum and his wife. Poor little "Gum," Aubrey declared, was soaked in eucalyptus; ears and nose plugged with wool saturated in the drug; a lozenge composed of it on his tongue. At intervals of five minutes or so he took his own temperature.

It was Poole's genial habit to amuse himself with these fears.

"I say! You're looking bad, Algum!" was his usual form of greeting.

He told how one of the boys of Algum's own House had flourished at breakfast a handkerchief dusted with pepper, for the pleasure of watching the terror of "old Gum" when he and his neighbours sneezed. Poole always denied that he had put the little fellow up to the trick; but the boy was a great favourite of his, and he certainly had not discouraged the old-time device.

It happened that this boy, who was always ripe for mischief, and had commended himself to Poole, the beauty-lover, by reason of his pretty face, was the next to fall sick.

Presently, two of the patients had died in the Sick-house. A young master, a new-comer, lonely in his

lodgings, had died. Amanda's lover left off joking about the influenza, changed the subject, even, when it was mentioned.

An oppressive melancholy hung about the place; sad tales were told of weeping relations summoned too late. The masters' wives donned mourning, talked to each other with tears in their eyes. The doctor, who dreaded the lowering of tone among them, forbade the school to be present at the burial of their comrades; but the masters followed—all who were well enough to be allowed to go; all but Poole.

"If it would bring them back, dear fellows, I would go. I would crawl there on my stomach," he declared. (He had a habit of convincing himself by forcible methods of speech.) "But as it won't do any good to them, and would lower the temperature of my own body, why should I?"

The General, who never did anything himself that was not to please himself, thought his future son-in-law an uncommonly sensible fellow. But Amanda chose to quarrel with him because he did not go with the rest.

"Is there not anything on earth more important to you than your own comfort?" she asked. Her eyes shone as she looked at him with an expression he could not mistake for one of admiration of himself.

"If I were wholly sane and sensible, nothing would be more important," he told her affably. "Being as I am, my darling girl, I am afraid I must admit that many things are."

"Then, I should really like to know what they are,"

she said, and dropped her lids and lifted a scornful chin.

He laughed. "I, really, am not quite so sure that you would," he said.

"I do not see why you need make a mystery, Aubrey. I have come, slowly, seeing more of you lately, to the conclusion that there is not in this world and the next anything more important to you than your own pleasure. You say there is. I am glad to hear it. I should like to know what."

"You said 'comfort,'" he reminded her. "My comfort and my pleasure are two quite different things, Amanda. My comfort is to sit here over the fire, in an unruffled *à-à-à* with you in your charming dress, the light from the shaded lamp falling so becomingly on your hair. My pleasure might be—might be——" he was smoking a cigarette, he breathed forth a little column of smoke and watched it curling upwards "—might lead me into all sorts of dangerous, *uncomfortable* situations," he finished on a flatter note.

Amanda watched him as he lay back in his chair. A light was on his handsome face other than that which came from the lamp above his head, and his dark, soft eyes looked at once eager and dreaming.

"I wonder I don't hate you," she said to him in her slow voice. "Sometimes I almost think I do."

He brought his gaze back unalarmedly to her face.

"You know, that constitutes half your attraction for me," he told her. "While you tell me that you love me, that it is impossible for you to live without me, while you grant me all the privileges of a lover, I have a feeling that you are on the verge of hating me

all the time. You can't think, dearest Amanda, what a zest it gives !”

“You are a bundle of selfishness and sensuousness,” she told him, her voice low and quiet, but the colour in her cheeks. “The kind of man you are, Aubrey, is the kind of man I loathe——”

He put out his long brown hand and took hers and laid it on his knee and gently smoothed it there “But me you love and marry,” he reminded her ; and softly laughed in her face when she would have removed the hand yet left it with him in the end.

The result of the funeral in the drizzling rain, of the fear and the depression, showed itself in the visitation by the disease of five of the remaining masters. Little Petres, the boy who had sown his handkerchief with pepper, was said to be dying.

Amanda, who had learnt the news in the town, repeated it to her lover when he came in for tea in the afternoon. She had so often heard him speak of the child with affection, repeat his cheeky speeches, expatiate on his violet-coloured eyes, his pretty face, that she must tell the news with a comforting hand upon her lover's arm, with eyes looking wistfully into his.

“Do you know, they say that he is dying ! Little Billy Petres !” she said, her voice falling over the cruel news.

He had heard it already. He pushed her gently from him. “Don't let's have any more talk of death,” he said. “The air is full of it. I never saw such an infernal place of sighs. ‘We're all killing ourselves with the doldrums, not the influenza, Poole,’ the old

Master said to me to-day. By God, he was right! I've had about as much as I can stick, for my part, Amanda."

"Of course you'll go and see poor little Petres?"

"Not I," he said, and poured out for himself the cup of tea she had neglected to make him. "I'm off," he told her.

"Off? You've hardly come in!"

"Off out of this, I mean. I don't see, for my part, when a man can turn his back on a disagreeable thing why he should make himself infernally miserable by staring at it. I'm going."

"I thought they were short-handed at the College? So many masters away——"

"I've wired a substitute. I'm off this afternoon, Amanda."

And he went.

Little Billy Petres died that night.

Amanda gathered every sweet-scented white blossom from her conservatory, took them to the Sick-house, and begged the matron to lay them on the body.

His mother had come in the night and was with it, the matron said. Her own eyes were red with weeping.

Amanda turned away with a quivering lip. Coming towards her was Mrs. Algum. The smile of abounding self-gratulation which as a rule illumined her countenance was absent for the nonce, a decent veil of sorrow seemed to be swathed about her habit of complacency; but her air of consciously doing the right thing and hoping the world was agape to see her do it was with her still. Her voice was carefully hushed.



She was on her way to see poor Lady Petres, she whispered. She heard that little Petres' body was to be taken down to Ascombe for burial. She was going to persuade the poor mother to come to Westfields for rest before undertaking the sad journey.

"She is in terrible grief," Amanda said. "She does not cry,—and even I feel as if when I once begin I shall never stop,—and nurse says will not leave the body."

"But that is wrong," Mrs. Algum unhesitatingly announced. "It is wrong to indulge in grief; but a few tears will do her good. I shall tell her stories about Petres and try to make her cry."

"Perhaps she would rather be left alone," Miss Chatterhouse suggested. But Mrs. Algum, who thought not, announced it in a tone there was no gainsaying.

"Besides, as Mr. Algum, at Petres' request, sat by his bedside through his last hours, there are many details his mother should know," she added.

"Did Mr. Algum do that?" Amanda asked. "But I thought Mr. Algum was ill in bed?"

"He arose from his bed," his wife told her. "He did it at the risk of his life, Amanda. But the call of a dying child is not one that either Mr. Algum or I would disregard. We did not disregard it."

Amanda turned away with a full heart. To think of the despised old molly-coddle, the "old Gum" of Aubrey's ridiculous tales, doing that! Never would she laugh at the plugs in his ears, the long beard worn to protect his delicate throat, his skull-cap sported in chapel, again.

She had not gone on her way many yards before

Mrs. Algum, sedately hurrying, overtook her. "Petres sent his love to Mr. Poole—he will like to know, when you are writing, I am sure. So sad that he could not go to him, as poor Petres had so set his heart on seeing him! Three times he sent for him. I have been saying to Mr. Algum 'how sad for poor Mr. Poole, he being a person of so much sensibility, that he could not go'!"

"Why could he not go?" Amanda asked, her voice, which had been wavering, hard and steady.

"His father's sudden illness, you see. Of course you knew he had to leave at a moment's notice?"

Oh yes! Amanda knew.

There had been a death in the town that morning, and the bell of St. Luke's Church was dismally tolling. Amanda went on her way with its sound in her ears, but with no longer a desire to cry. For in her heart another knell was ringing; it sounded the death of her once overwhelming passion for the man she had pledged herself to marry.

## CHAPTER XIX

### "IT SPOILS EVERYTHING"

THE town as well as the College was ravaged that winter by influenza in its worst form. In many instances father, mother, and children all suffered at once. The doctors of the place had their hands too full to bestow proper attention even on those who could afford to pay for it. Few nurses were available. In more than one case the rector of the parish was doctor and nurse and comforter combined. Where the bread-winner was laid by he drained his purse and his mother's to buy food. He not only supplied the firing, but lit the fires with his own hands on hearths otherwise cold.

His sister worked with him; doing it with the more credit to herself because she did not like the work. Hating dirt, and untidiness, and close-smelling rooms; not specially attracted even by sick parishioners; but obedient as ever, albeit not without murmurings, to her brother's will.

The winter came on with no healthy keenness of air. No freshness of blistering winds; no sharp, remedial frost and snow. Sullenly it descended upon a discouraged earth, with dull skies, rains, and hanging mists. Illness was still everywhere. When his own purse, and those that he could command of

his immediate friends, gave out, the rector, who was not afraid to use his pulpit for practical purposes, begged shamelessly. Told of mothers who crawled about waiting on sick children; of fathers who needed still the carefulest nursing, returning with lowered systems, half nourished, weak and miserable to their work. Of some sad cases in which they did so only to find their posts already filled.

The mortality, the smallness of the population considered, had been great; people's hearts were in a condition to be easily touched, it was not difficult to be eloquent in such a cause. But the congregation was poor in those days, and the response to Harold's appeal not liberal.

Amanda Chatterhouse called on him the next morning and put a fifty-pound note into his hand.

"Am I to thank General Chatterhouse for this?" he asked.

"Thank no one," she told him. "It is mine. I am fortunate to be able to put it to such a good use."

She did not tell him it was the money her god-mother had sent her, on receiving news of her engagement, to buy her wedding-gown. He, for his part, accepted the money as simply as it was given, thinking her indeed happy to have so much to give.

Amanda had not the satisfaction of seeing him whiten at her coming, but it struck her that he was paler than usual, preoccupied in manner, with a certain aloofness and detachment about him she had not noticed before.

Her own good works had consisted in giving to the old servant who filled the places of cook and house-

keeper at the Wilderness instructions to make as much soup and jelly as she thought necessary, and to give it wherever she thought fit. She had, however, heard through the garrulousness of the above privileged person much talk of the rector and his labour of love. She had meant to show him that she had heard and approved; to say a sweet word of flattery in her most enchanting manner. She found herself strongly moved to admiration of him; he deserved a reward and should have it.

But all at once the easy ascendancy she had held over him seemed less assured. Suddenly she felt that the word of commendation she had on her tongue would have been an impertinence.

"You must take care you don't overdo it, and get ill yourself," was all she said.

He smiled remotely, asked her to excuse him as he had no time to spare, thanked her without undue enthusiasm for the money she had brought him, and went.

Ursula remained; and, in the window, her book in her hand, her eyes on the street, Daisy Meers.

With her splendid hair gathered into a braid at the back of her neck, in her mourning dress, the pinafore at last abandoned, she had less the look of the grown-up baby which had so offended Amanda's taste; but, in the revealed dawn of womanhood, was none the less lovely.

Amanda, who had her own reasons for hating the girl, could not keep her gaze from seeking Daisy. But she made no more attempt than did Ursula to include her in the conversation, and Daisy was content to be ignored.

She hated Miss Chatterhouse; she hated all the ladies who came to the Rectory. Not one of them was nice to her. Never mind. She wouldn't be as old and as ugly as she thought them all to be as grand as they thought themselves. She would rather be pretty Daisy Meers they were all so jealous of; at whom every man and boy who went past the window looked and smiled.

It was of Aubrey Poole Amanda thought as she looked at the girl, trying to see with his eyes the beauty he extolled. Beside her, in her mental vision, she placed her own image as she had seen it but now in her glass before she left her bedroom. She was older, for one thing; no one appreciated better than she the fact that the flush of first youth, which is so adorable, which for Aubrey's sake she had bitterly regretted, was gone from her face. She was less pretty, besides. Even at seventeen she had not been so astonishingly pretty as this. Yet was she far from undervaluing the attractions she undeniably possessed; and in attempting to make a deliberate comparison she tried dispassionately to assure herself that no man of refinement could prefer this slovenly piece of immature loveliness in the window to the finish, the immaculate feminine delicacy, the unmistakable air of breeding she knew to be her own.

Again and again she assured herself of the fact; yet again and again looked at Daisy.

"You think my brother looking ill?" Ursula was saying. "No wonder. He gives himself no rest, takes absolutely no care. He is anxious, too, just now, about our mother. You knew that she also has had this horrible illness? She is better—oh yes

—but seems, for some reason, unable to shake it off satisfactorily. She has a good nurse, which is fortunate, as I, you see, am absolutely tied to the Rectory.” She gave an expressive glance in the direction of Daisy. “It would not do for me to leave her here alone,” she said.

“Of *course* not!” Amanda said. She opened her half-closed lids and gazed widely at Ursula, and was quite unusually emphatic.

“And my father objects to having her at Arden.”

“How uncomfortable for you!” Amanda said with quite a warm sympathy. The two young women were standing over the fire, speaking in lowered voices. The window, with Daisy lolling on its broad seat, was quite at the other end of the room. Amanda laid a friendly hand on that of Ursula, which hung on the mantelpiece. “Is it always to go on like this?” she softly asked.

Ursula raised a protesting shoulder. “Sooner or later something must be done,” she said. “It spoils everything. And because it does—just because of that—there is no moving Harry.”

Daisy noticed the lowered tone of the women’s voices. “Talking about me,” she said to herself, and made a face at their backs. “Let them! What do I care! They like me quite as well as I like them, I could tell them.”

The string of sixth-form boys, who, walking with linked arms, had already passed the window of the Rectory dining-room a half-dozen times, passed it once more with furtively smiling faces; Daisy smiled openly in return. What harm was there in such salutations? But for such small distractions Daisy

thought she must yawn her head off, and die of dullness.

Presently Ursula was called away to fill a medicine bottle with brandy for a sick parishioner, and Amanda was left with Daisy Meers. She thought at first she could not speak to her, then found it impossible to remain alone with her in silence. She moved nearer, therefore, and asked of Daisy what book she was reading with so much interest.

Daisy turned to the cover and read the title from it as if she had had no curiosity on the subject before. It was *David Copperfield*.

"And do you like it?"

"Not very much. It's so silly."

Amanda had to wish that Poole could have heard her make that remark, could have seen her stretch her arms above her head, the book in one hand, and yawn in Amanda's face. She was pleased to have her original impression that the girl was stupid and mannerless confirmed.

"You don't like Dickens, then?" she proceeded with her inquiry into the condition of Miss Meers' literary growth.

"Dickens?" Daisy stopped a second yawn with finger-tips laid on her lips.

"He wrote that book," Amanda informed her, and momentarily pressed her lips together as if to keep in her thoughts. "What other books have you read?" she inquired.

"Lots."

"And do you like any of them?"

"Pretty well."

"Not one better than another?"



"I don't know. They're all rather stupid."

"And what do you do with yourself all day long?"

Daisy was always slow in answering. She had a way of waiting between the question and the answer, as if it took an appreciable period for what was said to reach the seat of her understanding.

"I read—mostly," she said at length.

"Yet you don't seem to care for reading?"

"I don't mind it."

"Why don't you help Miss Fisher?"

"She likes to do her things best herself."

"Why don't you go out for walks?"

"Cousin Harold takes me sometimes."

Ursula put her head in at the door. "Here's another of them with another medicine bottle!" she said. "Do wait a couple of minutes more for me, Miss Chatterhouse."

Amanda went closer to the window as the door shut.

"You know Mr. Poole, of course?"

Daisy gazed at her questioner for a space, then slowly admitted she knew him.

"Naturally; he being your mother's lodger so long. I have no doubt he was always very kind to you?"

"Yes; he was," said Daisy. She played with a leaf of her book between her finger and thumb, keeping her eyes on it, as if, in spite of her mean opinion of the work, she wished to go on with it.

"And when you went up to London no doubt he called to see you sometimes?"

Daisy raised her eyes from the book without

raising her head; white rings showed beneath the large brown irises.

"No, he didn't," she said. "Mrs. Spender did not allow any gentlemen to come to see me."

The colour deepened in Amanda's face. "He took you to theatres, however?" she said. "Didn't he?" she persisted, when the girl remained silent.

"No, he didn't," she said again.

"You did not once see Mr. Poole while you were in London?"

"No," said Daisy, and went back to *David Copperfield* as though she wished it to be understood that was the last question she intended to answer.

## CHAPTER XX

### MRS. FISHER'S HOLIDAY

**O**N one winter afternoon, when the epidemic had worn itself out and he had time to spare, the rector of St. Luke's spent a long hour with his mother in her bedroom. He was run down in health himself, perhaps, but was conscious only of feeling fagged and weary. In such a condition Ursula, the opinionated and argumentative, was a little trying, apt to set the teeth on edge. His sister, it seemed to him, at the moment that he required rest was not a restful person. She would turn and twist and worry some trivial subject, of importance to her, but which he with his clearer sight saw to be a mere nothing in the scheme of things, till he was sick to death of it. Where he looked for affinity and a sympathetic point of view there was opposition and obtuseness.

In the matter of Amanda's gift, for instance,—he had not mentioned it to her, knowing how her comments would have jarred on his own state of mind. Either she would express unlimited curiosity as to what Miss Chatterhouse's motive could have been; imputing ones to her, perhaps, which the rector could not have entertained without agony; or she would—all unintentionally, but no less surely—be-

little the gift and the giver. When one has so much as Amanda, after all, what did it cost to give? At the Rectory they had been denying themselves all but the barest necessities to spare to those who needed,—had Miss Chatterhouse done that?

To every subject there are two handles, and his sister, the clergyman thought, generally got hold of the wrong one.

But his mother, who never grated on any mood of his, would understand.

Mrs. Fisher had spared her nurse to a patient accounted more seriously ill, but she had not yet given up the ways of an invalid nor come out of her bedroom. She sat in an old-fashioned chair with high back and "wings," that had belonged to her own father; and she was wrapped in a violet flannel dressing-gown which Harold remembered to have seen her wear in an illness long ago, in his boyhood.

"I'd have got into my dress if I'd known you'd been coming, my dear," she said. "I remember how you hated to see me wear this loose thing that time I had the inflammation."

"It was only because I could not believe you were really better till I saw you in your tight black gowns, and your white collars and cuffs again," he said. "I remember how frightened I was. You look very nice in the violet dressing-gown, mother."

"Do I, Harry?" She smiled. She was not a handsome woman, and had never been a vain one, but a word of praise of her looks from him had always made her supremely happy. Such had been very rare. She kept every one easily in her memory.

She held his hand when he stooped and kissed her, and did not for quite a long time let it go. They were not demonstrative of their affection for each other, but a sick mother may venture with the sternest son on a little display.

The white shawl laid over her raised feet—which were swelled, she mentioned, and always cold—kept slipping off, and the cushion beneath her head wanted frequent adjusting. Harold got up several times and attended to these little matters. She was to ring for his father when she was ready for her beef-tea, she told him; but it was there, keeping hot in the fender, and she drank it with the greater enjoyment because her son gave it to her.

Just what agreed with his idea of the fitting thing she said about Amanda's gift to his poor; neither seeming to fuss about it nor to undervalue it.

Miss Chatterhouse had called several times at Arden to inquire for Mrs. Fisher's health.

"I have not been allowed to see her yet, but your father had a long talk with her yesterday. He was full of her praise."

Harold groaned. "Did he tell about my College expenses, and the rest of it?" he inquired.

"When she comes again I will see her myself, dear," she promised soothingly.

"Yes—you see her, mother. You admire her, don't you?"

Mrs. Fisher gave him a quick glance and looked away. He was sitting with bent head, watching the fire, and his face was pale and worn looking.

"I do, my dear," she said gently. "I used to think her high, and set-up, as I had been told she

was; but that was in the old shop-days, before I knew her, Harry. It's nothing but her look that's given her the name for pride—there's none of it when she's sitting talking to you. And there's something in the way she speaks, and the way her lips go when she smiles, and the way she looks at you beneath her eyelids, I feel I could sit and watch for hours and never want to say a word. Do you know what I mean, my dear?"

He knew what his mother meant, he said, still watching the fire.

"I read so much of these young ladies in books with 'charm,'" Mrs. Fisher went on in her calm voice, that had lost much of its natural ring and life in her illness; "the last time I talked to Miss Chatterhouse I said to myself, 'I suppose this is what they mean. This is charm.'"

And Harold agreed perhaps it was.

"Is she really going to be married in the spring, Harry?"

He believed so, he said; and roused himself and got up, saying that he must go, his holiday was over.

"It has been nice having you for a little time to myself like this. It has been a holiday to me too, Harry."

Then he, for the last time, tucked the shawl about the feet, pulled up the cushion at the head, and bade his mother good-bye. Her gratitude for his performance of these simple services, the way she turned her head and watched him with love-kindled eyes to the door, touched to the heart the young man, for some reason in a melting mood that afternoon.

So often, because of a lubberly shame-facedness, every token of an affection which would be held of priceless value is denied. He was a man, not an awkward, bashful boy, ashamed of every emotion. He loved his mother with devotion, why should he not tell her so?

So he came back to the hearthrug by which she sat, and looked down upon her again with a face as grave as ever but with very kind eyes.

"I'm afraid I've often been too busy, or too intent on my own affairs, to be very nice to you, mother," he said.

The colour crept to the dark pallor of her cheeks, the tears to her eyes. "My dear!" she said, deprecating with soft indignation his reproach of himself.

"But I have, I know," he persisted. "And—you mustn't think anything of it."

"You have always been the dearest—the dearest——" she said, and had to stop.

"When my father has talked so much of what he has done,—I don't mean any disrespect to my father, I am very grateful,—I hope I am very grateful to him; but I have always known it is you—you I have to thank,—you, mother, for anything I have, or am, or hope to attain of credit. You. I have always felt this—I hoped you knew I felt it—but I have never been moved to say it before. Now it is said."

Then once more he kissed his mother and went.

Later, when Mr. Fisher came up to give his wife the beef-tea she had had already, he found her lying with closed eyes and tears upon her cheeks. He was filled with a fussy, irritable concern.

"Aren't you so well?" he demanded. When she

did not at once reply he bent over and shook her slightly. "Aren't you feeling so well, Mother?"

"Quite—quite as well," she reassured him.

"Then what, in goodness' name, are you crying for?"

She wiped away the slow tears with her hand, and opened her eyes upon the anxious face with its familiar wisp of beard. It was because she had had such a happy afternoon, she said; and told how Harold had been there.

"'Arold?" He straightened himself, and the look of satisfaction the name always brought into his face shone there, but he clicked his tongue with his teeth in a sound of displeasure. "Just a word when I see him this morning that he was coming and I'd 'ave been 'ere!" he said.

As it was he had passed an hour with his friend the chemist, who had gleaned for him quite a sheaf of gossip which had to do with Harold and Harold's parishioners. Some criticisms which had been made in the shop on the rector's begging sermon; some commendations of his energy and self-sacrifice during the last trying month of illness, also uttered by customers at the chemist's counter; many sage remarks of Mr. Fisher's own, of which the chemist had had the first benefit—how pleasant it would have been to retail all these things to Harold! And he had missed him!

"I'll drop in and see him this evening. I've 'eard several little matters which may interest him," he said.

He stood up on the hearthrug, his back to the fire, and with the familiar action raked out the long



narrow beard which hung to the middle button of his waistcoat.

"And what 'ad the Reverend 'Arold to say for himself this afternoon?" he inquired.

She told him of Amanda's gift, and he screwed his lips into a silent whistle.

"Done it on 'er own, had she? What would the General, what would Mr. Poole, say to that?" He rubbed his dry hands noisily together. "We gentlemen will 'ave to keep our women-kind away from St. Luke's," he chuckled. "The boy's got the tongue to wheedle the money out of the ladies' pockets, and no mistake!"

The old man was a trying companion for an invalid. He fidgeted on his feet, fidgeted with his beard, noisily attended to the fire, stooped above it with chilly hands held dangerously close to the blaze,—all the time talking, talking, talking of his son.

"He will be a great man—'Arold. You and I may not live to see it, Mother, but he will, all the same; mark my words. People are beginning to talk about him as a preacher. Old Balls counted five strangers among the congregation on Sunday evening. People, Balls said, he'd never seen at St. Luke's before."

Here he seized the little poker, noisily stirred the fire to a blaze, seized the shovel, noisily scraped up the dead ashes and put it out again.

"And I suppose," he went on resignedly, busy once more upon his beard,—“I suppose he's like the rest of them! You bring up your children, deny yourself, do your utmost, and never a word of thanks. I suppose he's forgotten who did it all for him,

eh? I suppose he didn't mention who he had to thank—eh, Mother?"

"He mentioned, only to-day, that he was grateful to you, my dear," Mother said. "He is a reserved young man; you can't expect him to be always talking about it. But he is grateful, all the same."

Mr. Fisher was gratified. "Grateful? I should think he is!" he said. He sprang upright upon the hearthrug, divided his coat skirts, clasped his hands at his back, raised himself upon his toes. "To think where he might 'ave been, and where I've placed him! I should think he is grateful!"

He demanded of "Mother" the exact words in which Harold had expressed the gratitude which was so pleasant to his ears. Twice, to humour him, she repeated the words. Asked for them for the third time, she did not reply, and her husband, looking closely at her, saw that she had fainted.

When, after a considerable period of unconsciousness, she revived, finding herself in bed where the old man and the servant had laid her, she insisted that she was as well as usual again, and refused to have her son and daughter summoned.

Her illness had been marked by such faintings. Not greatly alarmed, therefore, they left her for the night in a deep and comfortable sleep. And in the morning found that in her sleep she had died.

## CHAPTER XXI

### A SOCIAL OUTCAST

**B**Y the end of the Christmas term College and masters had regained their normal state of health and spirits. Mr. Algum found less difficulty in keeping discipline in his House now that little Petres was no longer there to laugh the stolid boys into insubordination. The Headmaster had composed a Latin inscription for the tablet, subscribed for by the school, which was to record the names of the three scholars and the young master who had died of influenza in the space of one week. Aubrey Poole, back again for the few last weeks of term, took an artistic and sentimental interest in the window Lady Petres was putting into the chapel in memory of her son. He had not previously turned his attention to the subject of painted windows in any special way, but with that facility which made his attainments wonderful in the eyes of slower-witted people, he speedily mastered all that was needful in order to converse with ease and authority on the matter. He had been a frequent visitor at the Petres' town-house, and Lady Petres came down and stayed with Amanda in order to have the benefit of Mr. Poole's advice in deciding on the site of the window.

She allowed herself also to be guided by his knowledge of art, and his well-known irreproachable taste, in choosing the design. The bereaved mother and the handsome Army Class master talked of Billy, his laughing, naughty ways, his dearness and lovingness of heart, both pairs of eyes wet with tears.

Lady Petres was charmed with the elegance and distinguished grace of Amanda, but thought her in her secret heart hardly worthy mate of the splendid young man. They would make a handsome pair; but had Miss Chatterhouse sympathy and depth of feeling sufficient to fathom the delightful nature of the man she was going to marry?

"The Petres' will be a nice house to stay at; we'll go and spend part of our honeymoon there, Amanda," Poole said. "That is, if you are of my opinion that it is a pity to begin life by nauseating ourselves with each other's unrelieved society."

Yes; Amanda agreed with that. She agreed, indeed, with most of his propositions of late. The idea that she would prove an exacting wife, if it had ever bothered him, must have ceased to do so. Her wilfulness, which had first piqued him, her coquetry, which had charmed, had all vanished of late. Poole accepted the change very amiably. Those months of engagement, when the bond between them had been kept secret, had told upon her, and induced her captiousness, her exaggerated notions of her claims upon him, sometimes her tears. She was sure of him now, and a different woman.

The engagement he had expected to irk him when once acknowledged irked him not at all. There were whole days in which, although he was now lodging

within a stone's throw of Amanda, he did not visit her. She asked him no questions, made no complaint. When she suggested that, the winter being an uncomfortable time for travelling, they had better put off their marriage till warmer weather, he, on his side equally reasonable, gave way at once.

It was all quite sane and sensible ; just as it should be. In irregular affairs of the heart there is fever of the blood, all sorts of disturbing deviations from the habitual order,—a tie that is expected to last for life must demand less of a man. A wife judiciously chosen should double her husband's income and his comfort, do credit to his choice, and be always *there*—wherever it might be she was wanted.

Actuated by his cool judgment, the sound critical taste he could always trust, he had deliberately chosen Amanda for his wife. Her face was not so distractingly pretty as other faces of his dreams ; the allurements of immature femininity, of enchanting stupidity, of ignorant daring and equally ignorant alarm, of soft helplessness alternating with delightfully unexpected cunning,—the qualities so dangerously attracting that side of his taste in lovely woman of which he had least reason to be proud,—were all wanting in Amanda Chatterhouse. But he could always be safe with her, always proud of her, always sure of her creating the right impression. He had made his bargain with his eyes open, and was soberly satisfied with it in those days.

At the school concert, held on the last night of the Christmas term, the boys, for whom already holidays and licence have begun, have a time-honoured custom at Wynborough of applauding the masters as they

appear. In proportion to the popularity of every one the applause was accorded. His position in the favour of the school each master, did he care to know it, could gauge by the amount of hand-clapping and cheering that greeted him as he came into the concert hall.

At the first of these concerts which she had attended Amanda remembered well the uproarious welcome which had heralded the late arrival on the scene of the handsome master of the Army Class. How the sound had thrilled her! She watched for his reception to-night with a painful apprehension. If the story of his fleeing from little Petres on his deathbed had become known to the boys, she knew that the sanity of his behaviour in that matter would have been spoken of by another name—a name abhorred of the public schoolboy.

Poole was, as usual, late in appearing. All the other masters had received their ovations, either great or small,—quite a triumph, she noticed, was accorded to little Mr. Algum, with his great beard, cries of Gum! Gum! Gum! resounding through the room,—when Aubrey came in, lithe and elegant, in the dress clothes which became him as well as his favourite “whites.” Passing down the long lane between the forms crowded with the Wynborough élite in their best attire, he took his seat by Amanda’s side.

Until he stood at her right hand she had not known of his arrival. Not a sound had greeted him. Not one note of cheering, not a single hand-clap.

He could not take such a reception as another man would have done, passing it off as a matter of in-

difference, pretending not to notice. But before he took his seat he stood up, conspicuous in the mass of seated people, and gave a long and challenging look at the silent boys.

Then, at last, one tiny sound broke the silence. Amanda shrank and paled as she heard it. A faint and low but unmistakable hiss.

The seven hundred boys would all be away by nine o'clock to-morrow morning. It was Poole's last appearance among them. It was their last, deliberate verdict on him who had begun by being a prime favourite.

Dismay was in the minds of the other masters. When opportunity presented, now this one, now that, came up to speak to Poole and Amanda. The concert over, the old Headmaster hurried down from his place in the front row, and overtaking his subordinate, walked through the room with him, his hand upon the younger man's shoulder. But nothing that could be said or done could do away with the impression which had been created, or wipe from Amanda's mind the memory of a public disgrace.

Aubrey Poole was a coward, and the boys had found it out.

Beyond the fact that she was the rector's mother, old Mrs. Fisher had been an absolutely unimportant person in the social life of Wynborough. Her death was an event hardly mentioned among the people who, as Mrs. Algum phrased it, "mattered." Her influence had not radiated beyond her own home, her value had been solely domestic. She had been no gossip, no busybody, not even a "church-worker."

Beyond the shop, beyond the little domain of her retired years, her name was seldom heard. But at her own fireside her presence was indispensable; in the lives of her husband and children she counted for the greatest good.

Her empty chair opposite him on the domestic hearth meant to her husband that the hearth was desolate. The son and daughter at the Rectory felt that the winter which was all about them had entered into their lives.

For all the fact that he had flattered himself on taking the lead, and keeping the reins, as he boasted to his friend the chemist, in his own hands, it was apparent that without his wife old Fisher was a helpless and futile person. He could not, of course, be left to the tender mercies of the maid-of-all-work; a housekeeper must be found for him. The rector saw at once that he must give up his sister. His sister, in her heart, was not altogether sorry to go.

Since the episode of the rejection of Fred Wing, Ursula had felt, in rebellious moments, becoming daily more frequent, that the installation of Harold at the Rectory had cost them all too dear. She had laboured to do her duty in it, but she had not taken easily to the position of clergywoman. The constant calls upon her time and energy; the discomfort of early services, all the year round, in all weathers; of evening classes; of meetings of mothers, of servant-girls, of school-children; the necessity of keeping down the butcher's bills and keeping up an unlimited supply of soup: all these had fallen heavily upon the shoulders of one used to take the daily burthen, whatever it was, hardly. All that had been pleasant



in the situation, the feeling that she was necessary to her brother, his chosen companion, had been done away with on the advent of Daisy, who, as Ursula complained, had "come between."

She preferred to all this the quiet, the cosiness, the independence of home life; since Fred Wing had been sent away she had clung to the thought of it. The undisturbed extra hour or two of bed in the cold winter mornings, the afternoons and evenings which should be her own. She could never now enjoy them with the banker's clerk in that little house of which he had spoken,—yet life under her father's roof would approach to such comfort nearer than this!

But at first Mr. Fisher would not hear of her leaving the Rectory. She shared her brother's position there—what had been good for Harold had been good for Ursula. The father's marvellous devotion in enabling his son to take Holy Orders had equally benefited, as he frequently pointed out to her, his daughter. But presently he changed his mind.

"If you leave 'Arold, 'ow about Daisy Meers?" he had asked his daughter. "I won't have her in my 'ouse, mind."

And then Ursula had explained to him that if she left the Rectory the unwelcome Daisy would perforce have to leave it too; that the present appeared an excellent opportunity of getting rid of her.

They decided not to make the change in a hurry. Ursula could stay on for a month or so, in order to give Daisy time to seek a situation, and Ursula opportunity to find the elderly kitchen-housekeeper it was decided would now be necessary to Harold's comfort.

The father and daughter, drawn together in the first days of bereavement, felt their sad hearts cheered as they arranged the details of this little conspiracy. The topic of how, surest and soonest, to dispose of Daisy Meers became one of constant and engrossing interest to them.

Beyond the little Rectory circle the certainty that at last the undesirable Daisy must go made a pleasing stir. So greatly had the female population the welfare of the Reverend Harold at heart there was not a woman among them who did not long to see the infantile loveliness of Miss Meers turned out into the cold world. Not one of the College ladies would have received the young person with the besmirched name beneath her own roof, but several of them made the attempt to foist her on their friends and acquaintances.

A situation as lady-help, at length found for her by Mrs. Algum, seemed to promise all that the most exacting could desire. It was in the family of a niece,—a delightful person, a clergyman's wife,—to whom the girl's history had been told, but who still declared herself willing to risk the consequences of engaging her. The salary offered was extremely small, the family was unnaturally large; but the chance to Miss Meers of making a start again in a Christian home, and under the eyes of a lady who, being forewarned, was forearmed, and ready to watch over her accordingly, was, as Mrs. Algum pointed out, a great one.

She came herself to the Rectory and made the offer of the post to the fortunate girl. Daisy declined at once.

"No, thank you. I don't wish to go," she said.

Being pressed by Mrs. Algem for a reason, she said she did not like children, nor wish any more to be where they were. Also, her mother had told her never to be under a clergyman's wife if she could help it.

"And what do you intend to do then, my good girl?" the lady inquired, privately marvelling at the audacity of the young person in daring to set forth her likings and dislikings in her presence. "You know you will have to do something, I suppose? You know you can't remain here in idleness longer? Don't you?"

Daisy was sitting in her favourite window-seat; she looked at her questioner, looked into the street again, did not answer.

"Tell me the sort of situation you wish for, and I will try to get it for you," Mrs. Algem went on with admirable self-control.

"You might, at any rate, thank Mrs. Algem for the trouble she is taking," Ursula severely interposed.

Daisy looked out of the window and said nothing.

"I have influential friends," Mrs. Algem announced. "Two colonial bishops are cousins," she explained, turning with smiling condescension to Ursula. "And on Mr. Algem's side of the family are several archdeacons and a dean. This young person would be absolutely sure, through my auspices, of getting into a desirable family."

The young person stolidly gazed from the window.

"Have you nothing to say, Daisy?" an irate Ursula demanded.

"Nothing."

No amount of words would have vanquished Mrs. Algum as did this extraordinary reticence. She retired discomfited.

So did several other ladies who interested themselves after the same fashion, vanquished by the same simple means.

Then Ursula spoke to her brother on the subject.

It was one night after Daisy was gone reluctantly to bed. It was always beyond Ursula's unassisted efforts to get her there. A decisive word from Harold had always to be spoken before the girl could be forced from her chair by the fire, from the book she yawned over, and the basket of her own unmended stockings, conscientiously placed by Ursula, night after night, at her side.

"I suppose you know, Harry, that Daisy is still unsuited with a situation?"

He looked over the top of his book at her. She had again chosen the unfortunate moment when he had reckoned on a peaceful half-hour in which he need not be bothered. But then, as Ursula often irritably asked of himself and herself, if she did not seize the only time in the day when Daisy did not "come between," when could she put such a matter before him?

"Of course you and she both know she can't stay here when once I'm gone?" she went on.

"Who says she can't stay," he asked her, "if I wish it?"

To answer such a question was superfluous. "Really, Harold!" she said.

"Really, Ursula!" he mimicked, and went back to his book.

"It is a matter in which you will find you will have to interest yourself, Harold," she pursued with exasperation. "You don't want your reputation to suffer shipwreck through Daisy Meers, I suppose?"

"My reputation?" He laid his book on his knee and sat up to regard her with a face of offence.

"Well!" said Ursula with spirit. "What am I to call it? We have lived it down a little—we have had all sorts of trouble, and people for a time have seemed to forget, but it has been always there in the background; destroying your influence; in people's minds against you."

"What? Be a little more explicit, please."

"You know quite well, Harry. Your conduct about Daisy."

"My conduct?"

"What is the use of repeating things after me, and seeming surprised? You understand, thoroughly. You know that dear mother was miserable about it——"

"I know that my mother would not have dreamed of interfering in a matter where my conscience told me I was right."

"We needn't go back to the past. I want to speak to you about what is to be done in the future. Mrs. Algum has very kindly found a place for Daisy——"

"Who asked Mrs. Algum to interfere?"

"My dear Harry, Mrs. Algum is not the only one. A dozen people have been interested, and have asked what was going to be done when I left the Rectory."

Her brother looked at her with a gaze of the frankest disapproval. "I am sorry to say it, Ursula, but the evidence has more than once been forced

upon me that you don't know how to check impertinence," he said.

He took up his book then, and continued to read through the rest of her somewhat voluble remarks.

But although he did not choose to discuss it, he, of course, understood the situation. On the very next day, the Rectory early dinner being over, he called Daisy into his study.

She lolled upon the arm of a chair on the other side of the narrow writing-table by which he stood, and she looked at him with eyes as guileless as the dove's.

"Daisy, my dear girl, why is your hair so untidy?" he asked. "I heard Ursula telling you to go up and make it neat before dinner. It didn't look any neater when you came down again, I noticed."

"It's the way I wear it," Daisy explained, and ran her fingers tenderly over the loose mass. Its disorder was considered; she would not have had it corrected on any account.

"Then wear it differently, since Ursula wishes it." He looked at her with the knit brow of worry. "It's a little hard, isn't it, that I should be bothered, day after day, about the fashion of your hair-dressing?"

Daisy rocked on the chair and regarded him mutely.

"How does it strike you?" he persisted. "Do you think that the subject of your hair should be, in this household, an unfailing source of unpleasantness?"

"I can't help it that I've got such a lot," Daisy said. "If I push it off my face, ever so, it comes tumbling back. Shall I have it cut off?" she asked him.

The hair had been made such a bone of contention between Ursula and its owner that he could have

found it in his heart gladly to acquiesce. "If I told you yes, you would not," he said doubtfully, smiling at her.

Her face lit a little, she nodded her head at him. "I would—for you," she said.

"But you see, my dear girl, if you'd sometimes do things for Ursula you'd be doing them for me, and doing them in the way which would be most acceptable. However, all this isn't what I wanted to say to you. I want you to tell me, Daisy, what it is you would like to do when Ursula goes? Something must be found for you then, and I should be glad to know what steps to take. Have you thought what you would like?"

"Yes. I should like," said Daisy, "to stay on at the Rectory and to take Ursula's place."

He was a little taken aback. "You can't possibly do that, Daisy!"

"I can," she protested. "I can order the dinner, and pour out your tea, and brush your Sunday clothes. I can do all that. I shall like it much better when Ursula isn't here."

"It is out of the question."

She began to cry then, child fashion, the backs of her fingers pressed to her eyes. "I thought you would keep me always—mother thought so. Mother said I need never go away from here; and I don't want to—I don't want to—I don't want to. I've always been good to you," she told him chokingly. "I've never answered back; I've done what you told me; I've been good."

"My dear, it is not that. It is that when Ursula's gone you can't stop on here alone."

"Ursula used, before I came," she objected. "If Ursula could, then why can't I?"

Why couldn't she, indeed? he asked of himself. What an absurd prudery, what an indelicate aping of delicacy it was! Her ignorance of the need for such pretences was charming. He was not in the mood to enlighten it.

When Daisy appeared at tea that afternoon a great change was to be noted in her appearance. The flopping large black bow had been removed from the nape of her neck, where it was pinned upon the great tail of loosely-braided hair. The hair had been smoothly brushed and tightly twisted, and was pinned as close as might be about her head. Ursula regarded the girl with startled eyes.

"Why, you look like other people now," she said. Yet not quite at her ease did Harold's sister notice the change.

Daisy's eyes were swollen and red with weeping. She took no heed of Ursula's remark, but waited till the master of the house came in.

"Does it please you now?" she asked him. "Will it do in a screw like this as well as if I cut it off?"

The rector, dragged from his abstraction, became aware of the change in her, and knew of what she was speaking.

"Why, you've turned into a woman!" he said.

"I am frightful!" she declared; and began at once to sob, the backs of her fingers to her eyes, her chin working up and down. "And it makes my head ache so. But if I wear it like this may I stay with you at the Rectory when Ursula is gone?"

Ursula's indignation would not allow her to await



her brother's reply. "You ought to be ashamed, Daisy!" she said. "I am ashamed of you, if my brother is not!"

"Ursula," the clergyman said, "will you send my cup of tea into the study? And will you be so good as to let me manage my own affairs?"

When he had gone, Daisy took her own cup, a thick slice of bread-and-butter, a big piece of cake, and followed to the door.

"Where are you going?" Ursula cried. "Sit down and get your tea here, Daisy."

Daisy went from the room as if she had not heard. Ursula flew up to follow. "Daisy, you are not to go to pester my brother in his study. He wishes for his tea alone. I forbid you!—do you hear?"

Daisy composedly crossed the hall to the study door. She was bigger than Ursula. To-day, with the new arrangement of hair, she looked as much of a woman; even while she called out commands to her the elder felt she could no longer coerce her. She watched the girl carrying her tea into the study, and closing the door upon Harold and herself, with a helpless rage.

When Mrs. Algum heard—and Ursula felt that she must pour her indignation into someone's ear or burst with the strength of the feeling—of Daisy's project to stay on at the Rectory, and of the fact that the rector did not appear to feel the flagitious nature of the suggestion, she spoke out in no measured terms.

"Your brother will be a Social Outcast," she said. "It will be impossible for anyone to ask him out to dine."

## CHAPTER XXII

### THROUGH THE RAIN

**T**WELVE ladies of the congregation attended to the flowers on the altar at St. Luke's, each undertaking them for a month at a time. Everyone knew that January was Amanda's month; it was a matter of necessity, therefore, that the flowers should be of the choicest, the conventional arrangement of them without a flaw. But the white hyacinths she had brought were not easy to manipulate, she was long in satisfying herself with the effect.

As she stood at the altar-rails, the better to judge their appearance at a distance, the small north door was pushed open, a step Amanda knew sounded in the chancel. She did not turn as the rector stood beside her.

"Is one *really* higher than the other?" she asked him, wistfully appealing, her head on one side. "I have done them *three* times and still they don't look right."

He considered the vases with deep, attentive eyes, said gravely he thought there was an inequality, went to the vestry on some business of his own, leaving Amanda for the fourth time to undress and redress the vases. The ladies who undertook duties of this, or of any sort in the parish did it for love of the

work, or must have been grievously disappointed. No praise or thanks or assistance did they get from the solemn young rector for their services.

The dark of the short winter afternoon came on so quickly that before she had finished her task Amanda could not see distinctly the particular green tube into which each individual white flower must be stuck. Outside, the rain fell gustily in the biting east wind, but the church was warmed in preparation for to-morrow's services; she was in no hurry to turn out into the weather.

The flowers being done with, she sat on one of the choir seats to watch the gorgeous colouring of the windows grow dull, opaque, turn black. She was not naturally fond of loneliness, gloom, or silence, but all three happened to be grateful to her then. Before she knew, the church was dark except for the faint light of dying day which came in at the still open north door.

By it, when at length she got up to go, in the stinging rain and wind, the rector was standing. Amanda gave a remorseful little cry.

"I thought you gone long ago! Surely I have not kept you waiting all this time?"

He locked the door and walked beside her down the short paved path to the gate which was opposite the Rectory door.

"I thought, as the weather is so bad and it grows dark, you would allow me to see you home," he explained. "And Ursula thought you would come in and have some tea first."

The long, low-ceilinged dining-room, with its leaping fire and shaded lamp, was attractive on such

a night. Ursula was happy in the consciousness of some hot tea-cakes of a specially successful kind, and really pleased to welcome Amanda. She fussed about her affectionately, pulling off her fur-lined coat, making a nest with cushions for her in the rector's big fireside chair. She scolded her brother, who burnt his fingers with the hot-water kettle, scolded him for not making Amanda take the bottom as well as the top layer of cake, scolded him because he refused to eat any himself.

"She makes my tea of a Stygian blackness and limits me to one piece of sugar," he complained to Amanda, very much at his ease with her when a third person was by.

"Two lumps of sugar in one tiny cup of tea are not good for him," Ursula explained, and appealed to Amanda. "No, Harry!—Harry, you are not to steal the sugar! Speak to him, Miss Chatterhouse. It is the sugar that gives him indigestion, not the tea."

Amanda smiled upon the pair, skirmishing with the sugar-basin, and looked with a feeling of pleasant restfulness round the homelike room. Outside, the rain beat noisily upon the windows.

"How happy you two must be!" she said wistfully, on the moment's impulse.

Both heard her with surprise; it was their habit to regard her as one of Fortune's favourites; neither was conscious of being happy.

Then the door opened and Daisy came in, drew a chair to the table, sat down.

"Good evening," Amanda said.

"Evening," said Daisy, her eyes on the tea-cake.

Beyond the small inevitable courtesies of the meal neither brother nor sister appeared to take any notice of Daisy. The three by the fire laughed and talked almost as though she had not been present. Almost—for Amanda could not keep her eyes from wandering now and again in her direction. How lovely the girl was! But, alas! to Amanda's taste how undesirable. She noticed how the greedy little hands rifled the dishes. The rector turned round once to pass something to Amanda. "Hallo!" he said, and looked at Daisy with a laugh—the dishes were all empty.

"Have you been reading any books since *David Copperfield*?" Amanda asked.

"Heaps," Daisy said.

The rector laughed. "Daisy is a great reader," he said, "but I fear we cannot call her a great critic."

"If you ask her, the same day she finishes it, what her book is about she can't tell you," Ursula declared.

"Yes, I can," contradicted Daisy, and scowled.

Ursula, and Amanda too, liked not only to read but to discuss the books they read. With great animation they proceeded to do so now; and the novel of which they talked, it appeared, Harold had also read. The ladies had thought it a work of genius; the clergyman held it to be sentimental trash. They were indignant with him for that sacrilegious opinion, and were eager in their denouncement of his obtuseness and bad taste. He defended himself laughingly, and made fun of the popular work from which, much as he despised it, he was able largely to quote for his purpose. Soon Amanda was

on his side, laughing too. It was all certainly very unlike life, and, yes, it was rather boring and commonplace, when you came to think of it seriously.

"There, you see!" the rector said triumphantly.

Only Ursula, who was never easy to dislodge from her position, continued to extol the popular book.

Each in turn invited Daisy to a seat by the fire, but she held aloof, listening to their light talk and laughter, or only seeming to listen, nibbling crumbs she picked from the cloth.

When Amanda, the rector by her side, was making her way through darkness, wind and rain, homeward, she felt impelled to speak of this strange inmate of his house.

"She is quite grown up at last, now that her hair is put away," she said; and he, in an uninterested, preoccupied way, assented. "How silent she seems. I have hardly ever heard her speak."

"She is not always silent," he told her. "She is only half educated, you know."

"How good you have been to her, Mr. Fisher!"

"In keeping her under my roof when all my parishioners desire me to turn her out!"

"It is a matter on which you have every right to please yourself," said Amanda, who was not always of that opinion.

"I think so, certainly."

"But," continued Amanda, who could not resist the word in season, "now that Miss Fisher is leaving the Rectory, your poor Daisy must, I suppose, go at last?"

"So they all tell me," the rector said; he shut down his umbrella sharply, as if he were shutting it upon the subject, and took hers, which was bobbing in the wind, from her hand. "If I may hold this it will shelter you better than it is doing at present," he said. "The rain all comes on my side."

He shielded her with great care and effectually; but they walked in silence over the wet pavement of the High Street. He could never talk easily of trifles, being alone with her, and Amanda felt that she had been snubbed and would not quickly start another subject. She grew vexed with herself as she walked on.

"Why need I have badgered him, too?" she asked of herself. "Because he is a clergyman is he to have no private affairs? no will of his own? And I have put myself in his mind with the vulgar herd, pushing in with prying eyes and impertinent tongue where I have no invitation to enter."

Across this thought, she was telling him, in answer to his question, that, being dressed for rough weather, she was not at all afraid of the rain, but liked the sting of it upon her face. She pointed out to him how pretty, on such a night, even, was the High Street, with its homely little bow-windowed shops, with the pleasant, familiar faces behind their counters; the tall, gabled mansions, cheek by jowl with the two-storied, humble dwelling-houses, sending out hospitable shafts of light from door and window over the broad, wet pavement.

"I love Wynborough," she told him.

"And I, too," he said. "A man, I suppose, always loves the place in which he was born. Ursula and I

used to play in that room over the shop where the light is now." They were passing Regent House. "But you were not born here, and will not, I suppose,"—he shifted his umbrella into his other hand,—“much longer live here?”

She made no reply, but stole a look at him. His face, in the light from the windows of Regent House, looked even paler than usual, she saw; the pugnacious jaw was held like iron; his lips had locked upon his last words as if he never intended them to open again. But he felt her eyes upon him and turned sharply.

"Is your wedding-day near?" he asked her. "Fixed?"

"It has been fixed and unfixed, fixed and unfixed. Just at present, it is—unfixed," she told him.

"When it takes place, will it be here? Shall you want me——?"

"No," she interrupted him quickly. She would not look again, but she felt how white was his face.

"I forgot," he said presently, "Mr. Poole's uncle is a dean, isn't he? And the Bishop told me that whenever you were married, he——"

"It is an old promise," she said hurriedly. "When I first met him I was a forward little wretch of sixteen. I asked him if he would—— Mr. Fisher," she broke off to begin again, "do you know what money it was I gave you to spend upon your poor? It was the money which should have bought my wedding-dress."

"I suppose it was all the more generous of you to give it," he said. "But when people are starving



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round us fifty pounds is a good deal to give for a single dress."

He had a man's crude notions on such a subject, and was man enough never to doubt that they were the right ones. He had not lived among people who thought much of dress, or who had talked of it in his presence. Her action, which she had thought would appear to him of stupendous import, had very little weight in his mind.

They had left the gleaming lights of the High Street, gaining the higher land, dimly lit by a blurred gas-lamp, here and there, where houses, widely separated from each other, stood within wide gardens.

As they neared the gate of the Wilderness: "Do you remember the last time you came to see me?" she asked.

"Very well."

"I had sent for you to tell you I knew what you thought I ought to know about Aubrey Poole."

"I remember."

"You had not expected it would make no difference to me, had you?"

He was silent. The rain beat noisily upon tree and drenched umbrella, and plashed upon the swimming road. They had passed through the gate and walked up the short incline to the house when she spoke again.

"You remember when that boy died at the College? Little Petres? He sent for Aubrey at the last. He would not go. He was afraid. Could you believe from your knowledge of me that I could be so infatuated by any man as to marry him, knowing

at the same time that he was a liar and a coward? Did you think I had it in me to do that?"

They had reached the step of the house as she asked the question, and, even as she finished, the door was flung open and the General appeared. He was in hat and macintosh, and a very bad temper.

"What are you doing out on such a beastly night in the pitch dark?" he spluttered. "It isn't very pleasant for me to have to turn out through an infernal deluge to look for you! You might have a little more consideration. Who have you got with you? Come in, whoever you are, and let me shut the door. Come in, Fisher."

But Fisher, hastily excusing himself, turned his back on the warmly glowing hall and went on his way through the rain and storm. And as he went he thought of the strange things Amanda had said to him.

He had not the less passionately admired the General's attractive daughter because he had not in the least understood her. She was always to him a beautiful enigma, plaguing the mind, but full of fascination. Often, with much dwelling on the subject, he had flattered himself he was getting to know her,—her mixture of worldliness and other-worldliness, her languor and her unexpected energy, her strength and her weakness,—only to find her in an absolutely unrecognised mood which had shaken him out of his conceit.

Was it possible that such a woman—any woman—could marry a man whom she knew to be liar and coward? she had asked him. Yet she herself was going to do it. Why?

He thought of the graceful strength of Aubrey Poole, his fine figure, his handsome face, the softness of his dark eyes, the caressing voice, the low, thick, seductive laughter. And he thought that there was only one answer to the question. She accepted him as he was because she greatly loved him.

"I am really sorry for that unfortunate parson of yours," the General said to his daughter as they sat over their dinner. "I swear I'd rather be a travelling tinker, with the right to some independence of action, than one of these poor devils of clergymen not able to call their souls their own. Algum's been at me to-day, badgering me to go to a sort of informal meeting he and that old commander-in-chief of his have arranged, to discuss what is to be done about this girl of Fisher's."

"Girl of Fisher's?" repeated Amanda, with a glance of disdainful reproof.

"This Daisy Meers-girl. It seems Fisher's got her, and means to stick to her. I told Algum I thought her an uncommonly pretty little thing, and was only surprised any parson should show such good taste."

"The Army has not the monopoly of all the good taste in the world, father."

"Algum's as big a fool as his wife; I like to get his monkey up."

"How vulgar and little and disgusting it all seems!"

"All the same, they're going to decide to-night,—the Algums, who have nothing whatever to do with it, the Tofts, the Suckers, and the influential among

the St. Luke's congregation,—if to remonstrate with Fisher himself, or to write to Fisher's Bishop."

"Mr. Fisher will know how to treat such impertinence," said Amanda with a heightened colour.

"In his place I'd tell them all to go and be damned," the General declared.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### ONLY ONE WAY

**W**HERE is my son?" Mr. Fisher demanded. He had walked into the rector's study and found it occupied by Daisy Meers alone. She was seated at the writing-table; her shoes, kicked from her feet, lay beneath her forward tilted chair. Daisy Meers never felt thoroughly at her ease unless in her stockinged feet. She was leaning on her elbows, her hands pushed into her now comparatively unobtrusive hair, and she looked up lazily with lack-lustre eyes at the irritated tone of the question.

"Where is 'Aroid? My son? The Reverend Mr. Fisher?" the old man repeated irascibly. He came forward into the room, still wearing his hat. "And why are you here, pray?" he went on. "My daughter has a class of young ladies in the dining-room. She is reading to them while they sew. Why, pray, are you not assisting Miss Fisher?"

"I hadn't a mind to," Daisy simply explained.

"And who are you, pray, to pick and choose? Duty—duty—that's what you're here in my son's house for—to do your duty; not to disgrace yourself with this sort of lollings, and goings on, in my son's study——"

His remarks trailed off and lost emphasis there

because, from the direction of Daisy's gaze, he became aware that someone had followed him into the room. Turning, he saw his son.

"Oh, it's you, is it?" he said. On no account would he have used that tone to Daisy in Harold's presence, but being detected in it, it became his dignity to maintain it now, although he did so with something of an effort. "I am telling Daisy Meers it's her duty to assist Ursula in the dining-room with the young ladies she is entertaining there."

"The G.F.S. class," Harold explained.

"I am sure I don't know who they were. They were all very lady-like young women, and all got up very respectfully when I entered. Daisy Meers, while she is here, I suppose, is expected to make herself useful, and——"

"Sit down, father," Harold said, and took his own chair.

"Daisy Meers," glaring in her direction, "is a young person who always had to be put in her place and told what her duty is. Your poor mother and I found that out when she was, at your request, received under our roof."

"In this instance I do not think Ursula needs any help with the G.F.S. class," the rector remarked.

The father, although delighting in the sound of it, always felt the son's cultured voice, the precision with which the words dropped from his lips, a reproach to his own fluster. The feeling irritated him into persistence.

"Wanted there or not—never mind. It's more seemly for her to be with the lady of the 'ouse. Parishioners see you in this room, I suppose? It

wouldn't look very well for parishioners to find Daisy Meers here, floundering in her chair, and taking up your time."

"Daisy doesn't disturb me," the rector said. "I have told her she can come in here to read whenever she likes."

Daisy was fumbling with her feet for her cast-off shoes beneath her tilted chair. The weight of her body was thrown on the narrow writing-table separating her from the rector. She looked in his face as she manoeuvred for the shoes, and laughed. She was not at all afraid of the horrid old man when Harold was there. It was funny to see him in such a temper.

The laugh and the familiarity of the situation enraged the poor parent. He gazed at the girl with the great, widely separated eyes, the moist red mouth, with positive hatred. He looked from her around the book-lined walls, at all the appropriate furniture of the room; and at his son in his clerical dress, wearing that air of unconscious dignity which marks the man, whatever his trade or profession, conscious of filling worthily the post, however humble or exalted, he holds. Harold, with apparent indifference to his father's feelings, was moving into position the disordered array of the writing-table.

The father noted everything with his angry eyes. Hadn't he paid for it all? The thoughts welling within him were more, in that agitated moment, than he could bear.

"Go out of the room," he burst forth, glaring at Daisy. "Go out of the room this instant, girl! I wish to speak to my son."

Daisy, one shoe on her foot, the other in her hand, made a hurried, hobbling exit. She looked in the rector's face, who had risen and was holding open the door for her, and giggled as she passed him. Harold shut the door upon her.

"Father," he said, "I don't recognise your right to turn my guest out of my room."

"Guest!" the father cried. "Guest, do you call her? Alice Meers' dirty, errand-girl brat——!"

"Wait! You will be sorry if you go on," the clergyman said, grown very pale. "I ask you, sir, not to say any more; to wait."

But the old man was so carried away by wrath as to have passed the bounds of that wise discretion which had compelled him hitherto, however much he bullied and bothered other people, to respect the presence of his son.

"Who are you that tell me to wait?" he cried. "Just tell me that, please? What you are 'aven't I made you? Had you in your pocket, pray, the two thousand pound it cost to set you up where you are, and where you dare to teach me to be'ave myself? Just ask yourself who it was that supplied the cash to support you at College; that——"

"I know it all, father," the rector said. "Did you turn Daisy from the room only to tell me that? You have said it all so often."

"And what's the good of my saying it, and repeating myself, if you don't take to heart what I've done for you—and be grateful? And 'ow are you showing your gratitude? 'Ow? By taking into the 'ouse I furnished for you, and put you into, to be a



credit, this lodging-house woman's disreputable 'ussy? This——"

"Father, I've told you if you go on you will be sorry!"

"Sorry? It's you that have cause to be sorry; with all your parish crying open shame on you——"

"Shame?" the clergyman repeated, and managed to laugh.

"Writing to your Bishop about you——"

Again the son repeated the words and the laugh.

"Ah, cackle! you may cackle!" the angry old man went on. "You'll cackle on the wrong side of your mouth when you are unfrocked—and that's what I can see you are coming to. And I thank God your mother did not live to see the day!"

"Let us, at least, leave my mother out of it," Harold said. "Yet, since you have mentioned her, I may as well remind you it would not have made her—exactly happy—to hear the things you have said to me to-day."

The old man swallowed down his wrath with an effort, and was silent for a minute. When he spoke again it was in a quieter tone, although he was visibly trembling.

"When your Bishop sends for you in this matter, pray what are you going to say to him, sir?"

"He won't send for me."

"When your parishioners in a deputation wait on you——"

"I assure you they won't wait on me."

"And when Ursula comes to me, pray, what do you intend to do about Daisy Meers?"

"I intend to marry her," the rector said.

"What!" the old man almost shrieked. "What!"

"To marry her," Harold repeated, facing his father with white lips.

For a minute the two confronted each other in silence, the long-bearded face of the elder working with the pain of a calamity beyond his worst dreaming; the younger face, set and rigid, but none the less full of wretchedness. Then the old man burst forth into broken, incoherent, raging speech.

It is better not to attempt to record the words in which he cursed his only son.

He went from the room, and, in the strength of his fury standing erect under the crushing blow, threw open the door of the dining-room, where the dozen girls composing the G.F.S. class sewed with bent heads, maintaining a discreet silence while Ursula read aloud. He cared nothing in the moment's madness for the fact that he was adding to the mischief caused by his son's folly and wickedness, that his lips were disseminating tidings he would have died in a saner mood rather than make public.

"Ursula, put on your 'at and come at once," he said. "Your brother is going to marry the degraded creature he has kept beneath his roof. This is no 'ome for a decent woman. Send these young ladies away, and come with me."

As she heard the street-door close upon the back of her unwilling father-in-law that was to be, Daisy came slipping back into the study. Harold, who had been moving uneasily up and down the room, went at once to her and took her arms. He held her

before him and looked into her face, no more seduced by the loveliness of it than awake to the revelation of the over-red lips, the over-full but beautiful throat, the shallow gaze of the wide brown eyes.

"Daisy," he said, "they want me to send you away. My father, my sister—all of them. They say, for some reason we won't go into now, that when Ursula goes you must not stay here."

She began to cry at once. "Don't send me," she implored. "Don't send me! I can't do the work they want me to do. I can't—can't take care of myself. I should only come back to you again, like I did before. Oh, don't send me, don't send me!"

"There is only one way, then," he said. "You must marry me, Daisy."

The meeting held at Westfields, of which notice had been given to General Chatterhouse, was carefully informal. Just a few of the College Set, condescending for the occasion to mingle with a few of the influential parishioners of St. Luke's, to talk a certain matter over, with tea and cake. It was convened, as Mrs. Algum informed them all, in the spirit of charity, and the discussion was conducted with quite conspicuous tenderness. Not only was everyone careful not to say a word derogatory of the Reverend Harold Fisher, but each was even prodigal of excuses for him. He was young, inexperienced in the ways of high-class society, had not the advantages of good birth and family traditions. Hints had certainly been thrown out to him, yet it was possible he did not understand that in keeping this young girl unchaperoned in his house he would be doing an

unusual thing, and outraging the feelings of the parish.

If the matter were put plainly and firmly before him Mrs. Algem was of opinion Mr. Fisher could not possibly persist in his course.

The question was who should undertake the invidious task? Mrs. Algem would have done so, gladly. She was always ready to undertake anything, and was quite sure of satisfying herself with the result. But the feeling of the other ladies was, as the case must now be put so very plainly, it would be more delicate to leave it in the hands of one of the sterner sex. As it was to be an entirely friendly movement, true refinement seemed to dictate that it should be made not by a churchwarden, not even by a parishioner, but by an outsider who was also a friend.

Because everyone else backed out of it, and his wife forbade him to do so, it was Mr. Algem who found himself in the end deputed to lead the forlorn hope.

The poor man, who was not possessed of his wife's bland assurance in the possession of unfailing tact, or of her invincible courage, went on his errand in a highly nervous mood. Face to face with the rector, aware at once from his visitor's manner that something unpleasant was in the wind, he talked of the weather, and beat about the bush, quite manifestly ill at ease. The clergyman, not helping him at all, sat watching him, a set look on his face, and the habitual quick flicker of eyelids over his intent eyes, waiting for what was to come.

"It is the wish of certain of your friends and members of your parish," Mr. Algem got out at length,

"that I should speak to you, as a much older man to a younger one, as one friend to another, on a certain subject, Mr. Fisher. The subject of the girl, Daisy Meers, who, I believe, is now beneath your roof."

"It is a subject on which I hope your communications will be as brief as possible," Harold said; and his eyelids ceased to snap, and he looked at his visitor with a gleam of fire in his eyes and a rigid mouth.

"We think, Mr. Fisher,—we can't help thinking,—and it is possible this view of the subject may not yet have occurred to you—that in your condition of young, unmarried man, and your position of priest of an important parish, and successor in that post to a conspicuously wise and good and blameless man, the presence in your Rectory of this young person of—of conspicuous beauty, and of a character that has been assailed——"

"Wrongfully," Harold interposed tersely.

"We wish above all things to be charitable—we will take your view," Algum hastened to say. "But, my dear rector, you know as well as I there must not be even the appearance of evil—even the appearance."

"Do you and Mrs. Algum and the rest desire me to turn this friendless girl into the street?"

"There are other homes open to her, surely!"

"There is not one. There is not in all this community of so-called Christians one woman to hold out a helpful hand to this motherless, maligned child; not one man with the courage to command his woman-kind to open his door to her."

"But, my dear rector—consider! When your sister leaves, as I hear she is about to do——"

"My sister has left me already."

"And you have this girl, at the present moment, actually alone with you? A girl of no—we will say of no *stability* of character; and a man, of however blameless repute, with whatever strict notions of honour, yet remember, my dear rector, not removed from the sphere of vulgar suspicion, coarse innuendo——"

"Certainly not removed from it," the rector said.

He gazed for a minute with disconcerting intentness in his visitor's face; then, "Mr. Algum," he said, "I thank you for your offices, which I am sure are meant to be friendly. You have taken an unpleasant task upon you, and I am happy to see it is one quite repugnant to your sense of decency; you will be glad to be released from it without further delay. You have said, with reluctance, I know, all—even more than is necessary. And I have this to say in reply. For the pitiful proprieties of people who would have hounded an innocent girl on to destruction I care less than nothing. I want none of their counsel, I do not seek their approbation. In my public capacity as rector of the parish I shall endeavour to fulfil my duty to the best of my ability, as—falling short through many natural imperfections, I am aware—I have already done. My private life is my own to direct. Emphatically I repudiate all interference with it. At the same time, perhaps, you will convey to anyone disposed to take interest in the matter that I have asked Miss Meers to marry me; and that, with as little delay as possible, she is to be my wife. Until that event occurs my parishioners may rest assured I shall know how to protect my own."

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**Mr. Algum had been coached by his wife, and knew fairly well how to meet argument with argument. But in face of this astounding and unlooked-for announcement he was dumb. Dumbly he rose to his feet, mutely held out his hand, took a speechless departure.**

## CHAPTER XXIV

### TOO LATE

**I**T was the General who told his daughter of the news with which Wynborough was ringing.

"To marry her! To marry Daisy Meers! He must be mad," she said.

Feeling for the moment weak with the shock, she sat down, and seeming to gaze wide-eyed at her father, gazed beyond him at the ruin of Harold Fisher's happiness and career.

"You've pushed him too far," the General said with a certain enjoyment of the fact. "You've all been at him, baiting, badgering—a pack of women always at his heel. The man had to assert his manhood. I infernally well respect him for it. You've only yourselves to thank."

Amanda did not defend herself, nor the rest of the "pack." "To marry her! To marry Daisy Meers!" she said again.

"Well, I can't see it matters," her father said. "Not to anyone but Fisher. He's playing the fool, of course; but a clergyman is privileged to play the fool. What does it matter?"

He went away to wash his hands for lunch. He had come in, fresh and breezy from the golf-links, eager to tell Amanda the news he had learnt there.



Amanda seemed to gaze on at the spot where he had stood; but presently she knit her brows above her staring eyes and her heart began to ache. "I could have saved him," she said to herself, her lips moving with the words. "I could have saved him."

That common girl, ignorant but not innocent,—and Harold Fisher!

"Harold. Harold Fisher!"

She repeated his name, and looked in his face. Every line of its rugged pallor she knew; and how the light of intelligence darted forth like the sudden flash of smouldering fires from his deep, attentive eyes.

"I could have saved him. Could have saved him."

What a load lay on her heart; how it ached! She could only pretend to eat her lunch.

"Are you sure?" she asked her father.

"Sure as that this is a cutlet bone. Fisher told Algum himself. A slap in old Gum's face! I'd like to have been there to see it. What is there to make a fuss about? The man falls in love with a pretty girl——"

"In love?" repeated Amanda. "No, not that, I assure you."

"I don't suppose you know, all the same. Why shouldn't he be in love with a lovely girl? You women make an absolute fool of a parson if he happens to be a young man. You jaw at him, and stuff his head with rubbish till he is not fit for the society of men, and doesn't know how to hold his own and talk with them. Then, when he turns restive, and wants one woman for himself, not a

troop always at his heels, you're offended, and each of you takes it as a personal affront."

Amanda was used to such gibes. To-day she did not attempt to reply to them.

"The sister has gone away. Fisher's got the girl to himself," the General remembered to tell her. Then he chuckled. It was the kind of situation at which, of course, he would chuckle. "I'm not a bit surprised, and I don't particularly blame Fisher, either,—why shouldn't a man please himself?—but I think he'll have some difficulty in getting his parish to swallow *Mrs.* Fisher whenever she attains to that dignity." Here he chuckled again and went.

"I could have saved him," Amanda said, left alone.

Was it possible to do so now?

Presently she put on her walking-dress, doing it as in a dream; but in a dream she would not have forgotten to be careful to look her best; she was careful to that end, mechanically, now.

She put on the sables which had been her god-mother's gift, and greatly became her, sent to the gardener for a bunch of violets to match those which she wore in her sable hat, combed into loose waves on either side of her face the soft hair which showed brightly against the dark fur. She did not even forget to sprinkle a few drops of violet scent upon the fur at her throat and her muff. She had studied the art of being beautiful and attractive all her life to such good effect that in a crisis it was still at her finger-tips.

Slowly she walked on her way, summoning nerve for what she intended to do. By the shop windows she lingered, not to inspect what was within them

but to prolong the time. Yet, although it amused her sometimes to wear a timid air, she was not really wanting in courage, and when, nearing the Rectory, she saw the rector approaching it from an opposite direction she hastened her steps and arrived simultaneously with him at his door.

"You know that Ursula is not with me?" he said.

"It is you I wished to see—and alone," she told him, smiling, with her quietly assured air.

Daisy, perhaps, was awaiting him in his study. He led the way into the dining-room, therefore, pulled a chair to the fire for her, did not himself sit down. He leant instead upon the tall back of a fireside chair, putting that piece of solid furniture, something tangible and visible, between himself and the presence which for him had such a powerful attraction.

Being seated, she did not speak at once, but pulled off her loose, fur-lined glove, and held, for the firelight to play on, and through it, her slim, jewelled hand.

The leaping flame sparkled among the sapphires and diamonds. He looked at the white fingers, semi-transparent with the roselight behind. She also looked in silence upon the hand, and presently it was of the hand she spoke.

"Do you remember the ring I have worn?" she asked him. "Alone, on this finger? A bit of lapis lazuli set in silver. Aubrey Poole brought it among a lot of quaint jewellery from Persia. It wasn't worth sixpence, perhaps, but it was quaint, and I liked it, and I asked him to give it me. It was my engagement ring. You remember it?"

He remembered very well, he told her.

"I do not wear it now," she said, and put her head on one side and considered gravely the bare third finger.

"Lost?" The rector scarcely opened his lips to say the word.

"No. Not lost." She brought back the hand and hid it in her muff.

"What, then? Where is the ring?"

"It is in a letter addressed to Aubrey Poole lying on my dressing-table, at home. He is travelling from place to place—I cannot send the letter, but it has been written for weeks."

There fell a long silence, the leaping of the flames the only sound. Amanda tightly laced her fingers within the muff on her lap, waiting for him to speak. A couple of minutes—what an age they seemed!—passed, and he still stood without a sound, looking into the fire. Then Amanda spoke.

"When I told you I had given you for your poor the price of my wedding-gown I thought you would have understood," she said. "I meant you to understand."

"What? Tell me in so many words."

"That my engagement is over."

"I did not know."

"You might have known. I have tried to tell you. You should have known. I could not put it in words."

"Ah!" he said, and turned upon her. The glint of the fire she loved to see there was in his eyes. "Ah!" he groaned, and turned from her and looked at the fire again.

Presently, in a voice so low that he heard the words more by the ear of the spirit than of the flesh: "Is it too late?" she breathed.

He waited long with hanging head, staring at the fire.

"Yes," he said at last. "Too late."

Presently she rose and stood with a foot upon the fender, and he moved from the chair and stood on the hearth beside her.

"Irrevocable?" she whispered.

"Irrevocable," he answered back, in a voice as low.

In that word everything was said, and both knew it. To attempt to put in painful words what was lying, a painful burthen on either heart, would not help. Yet, as they stood, shoulder to shoulder, and looked down upon the flames, each talked to the other. The outward silence was long but not irksome; it palpitated with the communion of souls.

Amanda was the first to break away from that mute intercourse. She drew her foot from the fender and sighed.

"Ah well!" she breathed, as her only comment on what had passed between them. Then she moved away a little and smiled at him.

He watched the white, jewelled fingers fasten the dark fur at her throat. She passed her muff for him to hold while she slipped on her glove.

"I thought I would tell you," she said.

"I"—speech was so difficult to him—"would like to thank you," he said. "It is not that I have not the words, but that there would be—too many. I might not stop in time."

He relinquished the muff reluctantly, as, lingeringly, she took it from him. "You know——?" he asked her; and she nodded and turned away.

At the door she stopped.

"You had better let her come to me," she said.

She smiled the delicious smile he knew so well upon the door he was in the act to open for her, when he demurred.

"Men must not be trusted with the management of such matters; least of all—you," she told him. "But the formalities all the same must be obeyed. Let her come. I wish it, and it will be best for you. Where is she? Let her come at once. Fetch her now."

Reluctant as he was he had to do so. Amanda turned back into the dining-room while the rector went to seek his betrothed.

She was not in the study as he had expected. Amanda, looking from the window, saw her returning from a visit to the sweet-shop, where she had run to expend a sixpence Harold at her earnest entreaty had bestowed on her. She held a packet of chocolate in her hand, and behind her came half a dozen of the College boys, who had been eating pastry behind the red blinds of the tuck-shop when she had come in. Ursula not being there to forbid it, the white muslin overall had reappeared, the white tam-o'-shanter was tossed upon her lovely head. Round her neck she had flung a fluffy, soiled, white-feather stole which was among her most cherished possessions.

Amanda, watching her with the hatred in her heart which this young person was capable of

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arousing in the breasts of many worthy women, saw the girl turn upon the step and smile upon her escort. The escort presented to view six pairs of blushing cheeks, grinning faces, lifted caps; and Daisy, bursting open the door, fell upon her betrothed about to go in search of her.

"Shipley's had sold out all their pep'mint creams——" she began—and then the rector, catching her by the arm, dragged her into the study.

What arguments he brought to bear to reduce her tearful resistance to acquiescence it is not necessary to repeat. Sufficient that, with downcast looks and a sheepish, reluctant air, she, in the end, presented herself before Amanda, and, in words too evidently put into her mouth, thanked that lady for the invitation, and announced, since Miss Chatterhouse was so good as to wish it, she would arrive at the Wilderness that evening.

"You must come in time for dinner at eight," Amanda said. "And Mr. Fisher must come too."

This invitation Harold declined for his own part, but promised that Daisy should be there.

"I have not got an evening dress," Daisy said. Her great eyes widened to a look of genuine interest, her red lips fell eagerly open. An evening dress! The girls who wear them as a matter of course perhaps never realise with what a covetous longing the girls who never wear them look upon those possessions!

Amanda smiled. An evening dress was not at all necessary, she said. Then she went.

"What a muddle we have made—he and I,"

she said to herself as she walked along. "What a muddle!"

She had gone fully believing that what she had to say would save him from a fatal step and dispose of Miss Daisy Meers, that miserable bone of contention in the parish dish, for ever. The mission had been an unmaidenly one; and it had failed.

She met a dozen people on her way, each of whom compelled her to stand and discuss the newly announced, mad project of the unfortunate rector. She listened to the tale of the pit of destruction he had dug for himself with smiling lips and a heart that bled.

"He will have to leave the parish," Mrs. Algem said. "He surely has more respect for his parishioners, and the memory of our late dear old rector and his delightful wife, than to settle with that creature beneath their roof, and in our midst."

"Do tell us what you mean to do, Miss Chatterhouse?" another lady eagerly inquired. "Are you going to congratulate Mr. Fisher?"

Amanda dropped her languid lids above her eyes with her fine smile. She did not think she should feel called upon to congratulate him, she said.

"I thought I would ask you. We want all to be prepared to do the same thing. I think we must ignore his engagement, and afterwards, as much as possible, ignore his wife."

Amanda did not feel in the mood to fight the battle of Harold and his Daisy. She smiled and shivered, said she was cold and must hurry home to the fire.

She longed indeed for its warmth, feeling cold



through and through, baffled, depressed; longing to escape from all these chattering people, to leave off smiling, nodding, acquiescing, to be alone with her sorrow for herself and for him.

Once at home, she threw off her walking-dress, put on a warm dressing-gown, and sat huddled over the fire which had been lit in her bedroom.

"If anyone comes, I am out," she said to the servant. "If anyone wants to ask about anything, I know nothing. I am to be left alone."

She did not for a moment regret what she had done; she did not feel humiliated that she had failed. She was too sure of him for that. She recalled him as he had stood beside her, remembering every tone, every change of face, every glance. Each word that had dropped from his tightly held lips she repeated. Of all that long silence she knew—ah, did she not know!—the value. She had all along, from the very beginning, been sure of his love. Was it possible there had been a time when she had not prized it? She prized it now; and in overwhelming measure knew it to be hers.

## CHAPTER XXV

### MR. FISHER GIVES IN

**Y**OU are unkind to make me go there!" Daisy complained. "I haven't got any smart dresses and jewellery and things, like Miss Chatterhouse, and I don't want to go to her house. Why can't I stay with you? Why are you unkind to me?"

The rector laid his hand on her shoulder and gently put her out of the room.

"Go and put your things together, Daisy; or go into the study and read. Don't worry me for a little, that's a good girl."

"I wasn't going to worry you," Daisy protested.

"But you must learn to let me be, sometimes. Let me be now, dear."

"You are unkind," Daisy protested. But he shut the door upon the remark.

He went back to his old position upon the hearth, and looked at the chair in which Amanda had sat. Presently he sat down in it himself—the faintest fragrance of violets still hung about it—and closed his eyes, for the moment disposed to believe it would be well with him if he never need open them again. Yet, being by nature more of a fighter than a sentimentalist, opened them pretty quickly, and

gazed, not blinking the sight of it, at the row he had set himself to hoe.

If he had known, the gate of Paradise might, even on earth, have stood open for him! But the knowledge had come too late, when he had shut and barred and bolted it with his own hand.

He might weep internally tears of blood for that, he might chew the cud of bitterness in secret; but he knew of himself that, having put his hand to the plough, he would not look back.

Presently his father appeared.

His sorrow for his lost wife, his daily, ever increasing need of her, the blow his son's conduct had dealt him, had told upon the ex-draper. "The old man had got hold of him" his cronies said. His eyes looked as if weeping and sleeplessness had dimmed them, his shoulders had rounded, he bent his head as he walked, his hair and beard were left untrimmed.

He came across the room to his son, and without a word put out his hand. Harold grasped it.

"Father—I" he said.

The old man's face was working, he wrung his son's hand, and looked in his face, for the minute unable to speak.

"'Arold, I give in," he said. "I give in, 'Arry. I take back what I said. I can't—I can't live at enmity—only son——"

"You must try to forgive me, father——"

The other held up a restraining hand. "That will do—not a word," he said. He turned away abruptly, and sat down, with a new feebleness, against the table, his back turned to his son.

Harold looked at the back, and noticed with sad

eyes how the muscles of the neck had dwindled ; the newly acquired droop of the shoulders was pathetic.

"I am afraid I am a disappointment to you, father. I owe you everything—and I am a disappointment," he said slowly.

The old man answered nothing, but as he sat at the table he lifted and let fall upon it his hand, with a restrained and measured movement, as if beating down in that way the emotion so hard to keep within control.

"In doing what I am going to do," Harold went on, "I may not be doing right, father, but I am doing what seems to me right." He waited a moment, watching with a full heart the bowed head, the pathetically moving hand. "You would not have me do less than that."

The gesticulating hand dropped and lay still. "Your mother—she would have wished no other ; I can't speak for myself, yet ; but she——"

The drooping shoulders heaved, there came tell-tale sounds of swallowing, of choking over tears. Harold's own eyes were dry, but his heart was wrung with pain. He drew near and laid a hand tenderly upon his father's arm, and held it there, standing silent till the shoulders grew quiet ; till, after a noisy interlude with his pocket-handkerchief, speech was possible to old Fisher again.

"I 'ave been too proud of you, 'Arry," he said. "Too proud, too ambitious. I am punished. But I can't live at variance—no, no ! I retract—retract. It is done with."

He got on his feet then, put away his handkerchief, snapped his smarting eyes, and began to rake out,

with the familiar action, the admired length of his iron-grey beard.

"I wish Daisy to come 'ome with me, 'Arold," he said. "Ursula and I have decided that will be for the best. She shall come to us until your——" he got the word out bravely at last—"marriage. I wish it; and Ula thinks it will be best."

"I am extremely grateful to you and Ula, father," Harold said; "but Miss Chatterhouse has taken Daisy away to stay with her."

"Miss Chatterhouse!" The old man's face lit. This was the first gleam of light he had seen in the hopeless distress of the whole affair. "That young lady has always shown herself a true friend," he said. "No side, whatever, about her. I often commented on it to your mother. No side! Your mother used to smile about it. There was a thought she 'ad; but——" he pulled himself up and finished with an attempt at a cheerful tone—"but that's all done with now."

His son walked with him to the hall door, opened it for him, wrung his father's hand, thanked him for coming, and for all his goodness.

"Yes, yes," the old man said. "I was wrong, too, 'Arry; I spoke too sharp. Your mother wouldn't have liked it. Better anything than quarrel, she used to say." He paused a minute, his gaze turned inward, as if he was listening to her saying it; then he looked at his son. "I tell you what, 'Arry," he said. "I wish we were all back at Regent 'Ouse again. Since I've lost your mother I'm always dreaming we're back there. 'Ard work—'ard work; and work I didn't always relish,—but we were 'appy there." As he stood

on the doorstep, he looked at the church across the way, and then turned and surveyed his son. "It's a fine position, 'Arry; there's no doubt I've put you into a fine position, my boy; but perhaps we might all have been 'appier if I'd stuck to the shop and made a draper of you."

Harold watched his father walking away, and with a wrung heart noticed those unmistakable signs of physical deterioration which trouble rather than age had worked. He knew that the memory of the half-suppressed sobbing, the heaving shoulders, the pathetic struggle for composure and cheerfulness, would be with him while he lived. He knew, too, that the course he had felt called on to pursue had half broken his father's heart. Yet the possibility to recant, to hesitate, even, did not occur to him. If what he meant to do was right, as he had brought himself to believe, then it was right, and should be done though twenty hearts should break.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### A RADIANT YOUNG PERSON

**A**MANDA, as mistress of her father's house, had always her own way in it, but it was not always a peaceful way. She knew, and would ever know, how, in office, to hold her own, but the Opposition was a noisy one. Over the fact that Daisy Meers had been invited to take up her abode at the Wilderness the General would have his say, his daughter knew; and he was not a person to say a thing and have done with it.

Sitting over her bedroom fire Amanda turned her attention between whiles to this consideration, and shrank and shivered at the prospect before her.

She was quite accustomed to her father's irritable fault-finding, to his arraignment of her as culprit, whatever in his circumstances fell amiss, and she had schooled herself to accept the position with perfect tact and temper. For her were none of the small triumphs called "answering back," and "the last word"; she indulged no vulgar striving for the best of the argument. But to-day she felt so tired, so bruised. She would have escaped what was immediately before her if she could.

When Daisy came she was still crouching in her dressing-gown over the fire. She could not send the

guest without explanation in to her father, awaiting his dinner—never in the best of tempers at such times—so received her visitor in her own room, and kept her sitting there while she dressed.

In remembrance of the plaint that Daisy had no evening dress to wear Amanda put herself into her quietest frock, but when Miss Meers' hat and coat were removed it was evident she had tried to convert the black serge, which was her best raiment, into a fashion, to her thinking, giving it an "evening" air.

She had probably read in her penny literature of governesses and other poor but beautiful heroines, bidden at a moment's notice to dinner and dances with the rich and great, who, by the simple device of turning in the necks of their dresses and edging the transformed garment with lace, easily took the shine out of the aristocratic guests, and reigned queens of beauty at no cost but that of a few scissor snips and a few stitches.

Daisy had turned in the neck of her frock, therefore; had hung around the widened aperture some cheap lace which Ursula had prohibited. About her throat was her tawdry string of pearls, also forbidden. Passing the shop of the greengrocer and florist, as Harold had walked with her to her destination, he had, at her urgent request, bought her a bunch of pink, half-opened anemones. Some of these were pinned in the lace at her neck, some tucked away between the creamy white of her skin and her shining, resplendent hair.

It was all very common and absurd. Amanda felt inclined to laugh at the poor contrivances. What a



silly, little, vulgar fool! Yet what a lovely one! The girl's beauty struck her as it had never done before—dazzled her almost.

Her walk through the cold air, or the excitement of her new experience, had brought an unusual colour to Miss Meers' cheeks. They were pink as the anemones themselves, and flower-like. The great black-lashed eyes were wide and shining; the too red lips, with their trick of falling apart, baby fashion, showed the small regular teeth, as white as snow. Not much, after all, of the neck could be shown,—the dress had refused to turn in as far as Daisy could have wished,—but how white and young and adorable it was!

Amanda looked, and felt a mere faded sketch of a woman beside this glowing bit of colour. But not for an instant did she feel any jealousy of the younger, superior charms. She knew Harold Fisher too well for that; was too sure of the power of her own attractions over him. Yet, what a weapon the girl wielded against other men—ordinary men! There would, after all, be no trouble with the General. No man would quarrel with such loveliness suddenly appearing at his board.

"What a radiant young person you are, Daisy," she said.

"Shall I take the flowers out of my hair?" Daisy asked.

Seeing Amanda wore none, she was ready to sacrifice this adornment; but Amanda would not allow it.

"Come down with me as you are," she said. She knew her father well enough to be aware he could

not be proof against the appeal of such glowing youth and beauty.

Dinner was half over when there came the grating of wheels before the windows, a loud ringing at the door, the sound of someone being admitted.

Amanda listened with a startled look. Her father laid down his knife and fork, irritably questioning her.

"Who on earth have you got coming in at this time of night?" he asked. "Can't you teach your friends what's the dinner hour, and ask them to come when we aren't at meals or not to come at all?"

Then the door opened, and Aubrey Poole came in.

"My dear fellow, if you were an angel from heaven I shouldn't call you welcome at such an hour," the General said. "Now, will you begin at the beginning and catch us up, or go on with us?"

"I'll begin at the beginning," Aubrey at once decided. "Unless I can begin at breakfast and go on through lunch to tea. I haven't eaten a mouthful since Dover. I thought you'd be the more glad to see me if I came as a surprise," he said to Amanda.

He held her hand in his large loose clasp. With all his accomplishments it was said of Aubrey Poole that he had never learnt the art of hand-shaking.

"Hallo, Baby!" he said.

He was not likely to be seduced into the betrayal of astonishment, but he must have felt surprised to see the daughter of his old-time landlady seated at that table.

"Hallo!" said Daisy.

They kept a good table at the Wilderness ; she had never tasted such delicious food. The silly old man, as she mentally styled the General, was always looking at her and paying her compliments. Amanda was not so bad in her own house. And now, of all agreeable things that could happen the chief had come to pass : Aubrey Poole was here. Daisy was really enjoying herself very much.

Amanda was smiling and gracious as ever, although a little pale. She thought of a certain letter with its enclosure lying on her table upstairs. For weeks she had been waiting to post it. That he would come before giving her the opportunity to send him that letter she had not expected.

He had been to Spain, he told them. "My last free kick before I settle down, General," he said. "I didn't write, Amanda. I meant to have a thorough holiday, and I wrote to no one. The worst of that arrangement was I missed the solace of hearing from you."

"But I wrote, all the same," Amanda told him. "One letter."

"And never sent it? You must let me have it still."

"It is waiting for you," Amanda told him gently, smiling. "You shall have it, Aubrey."

Left alone with his host, Poole was soon made aware of the reason of Daisy's presence. The news, quite evidently, interested him.

"*Marry* her?" he said. "Fisher? The parson? I say!"

He sat and stared upon the General, his long legs sprawling beneath the table, his arms crossed on his

stomach, each hand hiding itself in its opposite coat sleeve. He was still in the dress in which he had travelled. He ever scorned the conventional narrow tie, the high wall of white collar; his brown throat was bare, his flannel shirt tied at the throat with a large red silk handkerchief. "Give me comfort!" he always said when the fashion of his dress was questioned. But it was not comfort so much as an artistic irregularity he sought; and however comfortable, he would only wear what he believed to be picturesque.

Amanda had once thought the looseness of the clothes in which his lithe limbs had room to play, the freedom of his brown throat, the length of his moustache and hair, indulgences suited to his dark beauty. Lately she had wearied of the eccentricity. At seven-and-thirty a man was too old for such vagaries, she had begun to think. His indolence in dress, as in attitude, when he lolled on the sofa or squatted on the floor, had come to seem to her a slight, almost, to herself. "Am I not worth the trouble it would give him to change into another suit?" she had asked; and she had forgotten to defend her lover to her father when the General had declared one day Poole looked more like an acrobat than a schoolmaster.

To General Chatterhouse's recital of the forces which had in his opinion driven the poor parson on to declare for matrimony, Poole listened, his dark eyes eloquent of interest, punctuating the other's disjointed sentences with his soft "I say!" At the finish "Isn't she a lovely child?" he asked.

"Child?" the General echoed. "Going on for

eighteen, she tells me—a little more than a child, eh?"

Poole would not hear of it. "She is just an exquisite child," he said. "You don't get that delicacy of colour and of texture except in childhood. Look closely at her cheek, it is of the material of a rose-leaf. It is a feast to look at her!"

"You ate your dinner," the General reminded him.

"And you said grace before it, I suppose? I tell you what; we'd far better give thanks to Heaven for the privilege of looking at Daisy Meers, General."

The General was not very fond of a *little-d-ttle* with his prospective son-in-law; he got up from the table.

"You can say what prayers you like, of course," he said. "There is a continuation of the feast awaiting you in the drawing-room, remember. Shall we go?"

In the drawing-room Poole asked for music. He played and sang himself, as he did a little of everything himself, but he was not now in a mood to perform. He preferred to sit at Amanda's side, his back to the piano—but so placed that a backward inclination of his head brought his lips against her ear to whisper "Go on. Go on," when she stopped—and to gaze and gaze upon Miss Meers.

"I had forgotten," Amanda heard him murmur.

She bent her head towards him as she played. "Forgotten what?"

"How lovely that child was. Or is she lovelier than ever, perhaps?"

Amanda's lips moved in a smile. "That is it, I think."

"You mean she is lovelier? Truly, I believe you are right."

"Go and talk to her," Amanda advised. "You need not do duty by me."

"That is it," he sighed. "I don't want to destroy the illusion. This is perfect, to sit by you, and——"

"And to look at her," Amanda finished. She laughed amid the chords she was striking, as if she really enjoyed the situation.

The General, at the other end of the room, had undertaken to teach Daisy the moves in chess. If she had not been so pretty he would speedily have lost his temper over her stupidity. As it was he laughed at her constantly repeated mistakes, and she laughed whenever he did, and the pair became noisy and merry. The girl made a lovely picture seated opposite the old soldier beneath the rose-shaded standard lamp. A picture delightful for him and Aubrey Poole to look at.

"If he taught her from now till the crash of doom she would not learn," Aubrey said in an aside to the lady at the piano.

When he was bidding Amanda good-night he remembered to ask for the letter she had written him.

"He wants to put it under his pillow," the General chuckled.

"Go and fetch it for me," the lover insisted.

But Amanda put him off lightly. "Not to-night," she said. "It shall be a treat in store."

"How can I ever have thought I loved that man?" she asked of herself as she reached her own room. "His attitude to me is an insult. Since nearly the first day of our absurd engagement it has been one long insult. Only, I would not see."

She lifted the letter from its place on her dressing-table. The sight of it had been a salve to her pride through the long weeks of his silence, and absence she knew not where. She had looked at the name written without any address on the envelope. "If you think at all of me you must be thinking that there is nothing I will not endure from you; no slight, no rudeness even, in my insane love for you I won't forgive. And all the time the letter lies here a witness between us that you are nothing to me, owe me nothing, have less power to hurt me than the stranger I pass in the street."

Yet, perhaps he had more power to move her still than she thought, for she picked up the letter that dismissed him now, and turned hurriedly to take it to Aubrey Poole. But at the door of her room stopped, and stood with the letter in her hand, thinking.

She recalled the man's look as he had openly watched the other girl. Once she had intercepted a smile from Daisy to him. It had seemed to her that the glance which accompanied the smile had been at once familiar and sly. She came back with the letter and laid it again on her dressing-table.

Presently, she stood before the fire and looked down into it, her foot on the fender, purposely assuming the position she had held when Harold Fisher had stood beside her this afternoon, shoulder to shoulder. She recalled the rigid sadness of his face, and heard again the whisper in which he had told her that what he had done was irrevocable.

Suppose it wasn't? Suppose a way could be found to save him?

As she stood there she heard a footstep passing her door she knew to be Poole's on his way to his room. She darted to her door, opened it, softly called his name, followed him a few steps down the dimly lit passage.

"You've brought me my letter?"

"Not yet. You shall have it in time if you're good. Aubrey—it's rather an awkwardness, our having Daisy Meers here—with you."

"I don't see it, my darling girl. Why?" He laid the hand which did not hold the candlestick on her shoulder and looked in her face. "You've come to give me a kiss, Amanda. Do you know we have never had an instant alone, this evening?"

Amanda knew it; but repudiated the notion she had come for the kiss, and he did not insist. He had never been a troublesome lover. Amanda no longer felt any bitterness in the fact.

"Why 'awkward'?" he questioned her.

"Aubrey—you can't have forgotten, surely?"

"That cock-and-bull story of the little parson's? The romance in which I was wolf and grandmother in one, and devoured poor Red Riding-Hood? I thought you and I had discussed that fairy-tale for once and all, Amanda, and decided that we weren't to be upset by such absurdities. However, if you think we're not to be trusted under the same roof, if you're doing me the honour to be jealous, darling——"

"Aubrey!"

"Well, I thought you'd too much dignity! A woman who was vulgar enough to suspect me I'd chuck, at the altar. I swear I would, Amanda."



"My dear boy, you won't get the chance to 'chuck' me there."

"Then, where is the awkwardness?"

"I was looking at it from Mr. Fisher's point of view." She put up her hand, slightly pressed the one upon her shoulder, gently removed it. "Interesting as the performance was—that little drama you spoke of——"

"Red Riding-Hood?"

"I don't think Mr. Fisher exactly approved your rôle in it."

"Am I anxious for his approval? Are you?"

"To a certain extent."

"Then kick me out. Kick me out, darling."

"Oh no," Amanda said, with an air of delicately refraining from such violent measures. "I only wished to say a word of caution. This lovely Miss Meers, Aubrey—this 'child,' as you call her—has not shown herself, you must admit, very averse from general admiration, and the indiscriminate love-making of the—public. If you were to forget to be discreet, she would not exactly—repulse you."

He took up the cudgels for Daisy immediately. "You don't know her," he said. "She is really as timid as a fawn. Takes fright at the first advance——"

Amanda interrupted him hastily. "I heard that once before," she said. "It is enough. All I wished to say is that this timid, but attractive, person is under my care—admire all you like, my dear Aubrey, but admire at a distance."

"Likely I should desire more! In this house! Good-night, my darling girl. I'm dead asleep."

"Good-night. Sleep well, Aubrey."

"I suppose your little parson is furiously jealous?"

"Why 'my' little parson, specially?"

"Because you, who are above so many things and most people, are, I discover, not above the feminine weakness for an unmarried parson. I never noticed any devotion to church or parish affairs till lately. I put it down to little Fisher."

"It is he, undoubtedly." Her lips curved faintly as if the accusation were too ridiculous to refute.

"And so he is jealous of his little Daisy?"

"Furiously; as you say."

He put down his candlestick and took her by the shoulders and bent to kiss her, but she moved aside her face to say—

"And very much in love."

"Is that so?" His eyes glowed; he held himself still, reflecting for a moment on the intelligence. "So am I in love," he said then, and stooped again to kiss her; but she started back from him, and threw up her head as if to listen.

"My father is coming!" she whispered warningly. "Good-night; good-night!" and flew back to her room.

There was no reason why a man should not kiss his affianced wife before her father that Aubrey Poole knew, but he repaired to his bedroom not seriously regretting the lost opportunity. Being of the order of man that does not greatly prize the good that is about his feet or the kisses that are lawfully his own.

Amanda, who had known him long and well, who remembered the difference between the man who had

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coveted her,—who had seen a rival in everyone who approached, who had persuasively, passionately entreated, madly wooed,—and the man to whom she had promised herself, who, being sure of her, had so quickly tired, understood this characteristic of his, and turned it to account.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### AUBREY HAS HIS LETTER

"MR. FISHER has not called to see you," Miss Chatterhouse remarked to Daisy, as the two sat together after dinner on the next night.

"No," assented Daisy; "he hasn't."

"And you haven't been to look for him?"

"No; I haven't."

"Aren't you longing frightfully to see him?"

"I don't know."

"Not know if you are longing to see the man you are going to marry in a few weeks?"

Daisy smiled with her wide gaze in Miss Chatterhouse's face, and said nothing.

"I'm afraid you won't care to stay long with me if Mr. Fisher does not come to see you here?"

"Yes, I shall," Daisy protested. "I like the kitten."

It was a little white Persian kitten, fluffy and adorable, that Poole had given Amanda before he went to Spain. He and Daisy found equal attraction in the pretty, capricious animal. It was always either lying in Daisy's arms, while he teased it to exhibitions of play or temper, or he held it buttoned into the breast of his coat, and Daisy spent her time and infinite patience in coaxing it to come out from there.

Afterwards, in looking back to the little drama which was playing itself out at the Wilderness, it seemed always to Amanda that the white Persian kitten had taken a conspicuous part.

Poole stole the cream of the breakfast-table for Daisy to give it to lap, and she desired him to save the choicest bits from whatever he had on his plate for the animal at lunch. When, in the evenings, Daisy's expression of puzzlement over the mysterious ways of knights and queens and castles became too pitiful, he set the kitten in the middle of the chess-board, putting a summary end to the game. When she retired for the night Daisy liked to take Leila to sleep with her, and Aubrey Poole spent a quarter of an hour on hands and knees crawling under chairs and sofas in search of the unwilling little wretch. While he talked to Amanda of a plan he had that they should go to Portugal for their honeymoon, he sat on the hearthrug before Daisy's chair and tickled with a spill the ears of the kitten in her lap.

Amanda, meanwhile, looked at these antics, wondering. Was it possible that a clever man could be so stupid? Could one who had passed his time since boyhood at the feet of some woman or another be so ignorant of the fashion in which she loves her lover? She marvelled that he could be so easily duped by her smiling acquiescence, by her indifferent calm. She who had long ceased to cherish any admiration for his character grew even to despise his intellectual capacity. A child could fool him, she said to herself, noticing his easy assurance in her acceptance of an impossible position. She did herself injustice here; being herself a better actor than she knew.

The weather was bad; Poole would not go out. He was even more afraid of the rain than a woman in her finery. Daisy found his society and that of the kitten more to her taste than Amanda's, conscientiously doing her constitutional in all weathers. Amanda apologised sweetly to both for leaving them.

"You are mad to go," Poole would say, buttoning her waterproof for her, dutifully escorting her to the door.

"Oh no; I don't think so," Amanda would reply; and would smile to herself as she faced the elements.

She walked into the country, avoiding the town; for she neither wished to speak of Daisy to her too inquiring friends, nor to report the return of Aubrey Poole. Also, she was anxious to defer as long as possible a meeting with the rector of St. Luke's.

On the third evening of Daisy's stay at the Wilderness a letter was brought to her from her betrothed. His lukewarm attitude in neither visiting her nor writing had been made by Poole, openly on the watch, a theme for jest.

"At last our lover breaks silence!" he said as the letter was put into the girl's hand.

He watched her while she opened and read it. "What does the impassioned one say for himself?" he inquired.

Daisy blushed, giggled, read a little letter, took a little peep over its pages at Poole, read a little more.

"She is too much of a baby to have a love-letter," he told Amanda, looking on. "Skip the hard words, Baby. Why, it's as long as one of his sermons, and as dull, I swear. Skip it all, Baby."

"Let her read her letter in peace, Aubrey," Amanda interposed.

"She shall read it to music," he declared. He put himself at the piano, played a few short bars. "Reads better so, doesn't it?" he inquired.

Daisy crumpled the letter and put it in her pocket. "I can't read it at all if you're so silly," she giggled.

Then she turned to Amanda. "I can't make out his writing much—it's so small. But he's gone away."

"Gone away!" repeated Amanda.

"Gone away!" whispered Poole, and swung round on the music-stool.

"The doctor ordered old Mr. Fisher away at once, and Ursula couldn't take him alone—so he's gone too. And I don't care a bit—you needn't be so silly," she admonished Poole, who was kneeling at her feet offering his pocket-handkerchief.

"She won't suffer so much if she allows herself to weep—will she, Amanda?"

"Oh, how silly you are, Mr. Poole! I never saw anyone so silly. Isn't Mr. Poole silly, Miss Chatterhouse?"

"He certainly seems to have grown very—young," Amanda admitted.

She felt herself to have grown, in those days, very old. She had to assure herself by looking in the glass sometimes that her face was unlined by age. It was something of a shock to her to find herself still in good looks, her hair as brightly brown, her eyes clear, her cheeks and upturned chin firm. At nine-and-twenty one is really not an old woman, she had to remind herself, such a gulf in time there seemed

between "the child," as the General and Aubrey Poole called Daisy Meers, and herself. With such a happy indifference on their part she found herself placed beyond the pale of interest.

"I say, what does he mean by running away?" Poole asked of her when for a minute they were alone. "Does Fisher know I'm here?"

"If he did you may be quite sure he would not run away."

"You said he was head over ears in love."

"And he is!" she told him, the colour deepening in her face.

"Nonsense! He is a fish; a cold-blooded fish of a man."

"He isn't."

"How should you know, Amanda?"

She was lying back lazily in her chair; she closed her eyes, for a moment, and thought of a face passion-pale, of teeth hard-set, and obstinate lips that would not open lest words best left unsaid should be spoken. Her own lips curved involuntarily to a smile. "I do know," she said.

"How?" he repeated sharply; and she opened her eyes upon him in alarm, but was instantly reassured. The awakened interest in his voice had not been for her. "How can you possibly know?"

"Know when a man is in love, my dear Aubrey? How can I be a woman and not know, you mean. And love to Harold Fisher means more than to such worldly-wise people as you and I, Aubrey; who love, of course, but don't forget there are other men and women in the world. To this poor man the woman he loves *is* the only one——"



"Crude little beggar! What a fool to leave the child, then!"

"He knows she is in good hands," Amanda reminded him.

Going out, one afternoon, for her walk, she left Daisy at the piano. She had the little knowledge of music which is such a dangerous thing, and had been thumping away to a faulty bass, without any nervous regard to time or harmony, the pedal held with a view to hide any possible lapses. When Amanda returned, coming in for some reason earlier than usual, the piano was going still, but it was not Miss Meers who was playing. Aubrey Poole, kneeling beside her on the music-stool, held her with his right arm tightly about her waist, his left hand, moving with faultless touch among the bass notes of the piano, made a running accompaniment to the words he was whispering.

The arrangement, designed to cheat all hearers into the belief that Daisy was practising still, had the undesired effect of deadening the sound of the opening door. Amanda, standing just within the room, had for the minute the benefit of an uninterrupted view of the interesting group.

Then, very gently she withdrew, ran up to her room, took from her dressing-table, where for so long it had awaited this moment, the letter containing her engagement ring,—he had never missed it from her finger,—addressed to Aubrey Poole, and with it in her hand ran down again.

The situation was unchanged, except that rather less of Daisy was on the music-stool, rather more of her in the gentleman's arms. The accompaniment

was running on, uninterruptedly, and so was Mr. Poole's murmuring voice.

Amanda came forward into the room and took up her position on the hearthrug. Only the backs of the pair of heads—the smooth brown, the gloriously rippled golden—were visible to her where she stood; but it was evident that their cheeks were touching.

The roulade in the bass ceased, the skilful hands drew forth a sweetly languorous chord or two, the murmuring voice was silent.

Amanda waited, her head up, the smile on her scornfully turned lip and in her half-hidden eyes she meant them to find when they discovered her. And presently, moved by the magnetism which attracts to the watcher the person who is watched, Poole dropped his hand from the girl's waist, and turned round.

"Ah!" he said, breathing the monosyllable softly under his breath. He ran his fingers in a brilliant passage up and down the key-board, and rose to his feet.

Without any sign of shame in his face, or change of colour, he confronted Amanda. Amanda was the least jealous of any woman he had encountered, but the present situation had been rather a pronounced one. Still, he had been in many tight places without being put out of countenance.

"This poor Baby has no more soul for music than the kitten under the table," he began, his soft gaze fixed with a disarming candour upon Amanda's face.

"Is that so? I am so sorry to interrupt you," she

said sweetly. "This is the second time I came in, but you did not hear me. I came to bring you the letter of which I told you. You will see by the date it was written some time ago. I have waited for an opportunity to give it. Here it is, Aubrey, at last."

He took it with some reluctance, looking doubtfully at her.

"Come with me, Daisy," she said to the girl, standing fidgeting with the music at the piano. "We will give Mr. Poole time to read his letter."

But when she stood with Daisy Meers at the foot of the staircase her tone changed. "You have very much to think of," she said, in the hard voice of dislike. "You will wish, I am sure, to go to your own room. You have at last chosen between Harold Fisher and your other lover; but you will have to decide in what words to communicate the fact to Mr. Fisher."

Her distaste for poor Daisy, that piece of common earth about which, because of the foolishness and wickedness of men, such a pother had been made, was confessed at last. She looked at her as a princess might have looked at a kitchen-maid who had ventured on a familiarity.

Daisy at once began to cry in the familiar fashion, backs of fingers to eyes, chin jerking, sounds of choking. Amanda, walking up before her, threw open for her guest her bedroom door.

"Don't tell Harold. Please don't tell Harold. It was Mr. Poole's fault. He *will* always be so silly directly I'm alone with him. Oh, don't tell Harold," Daisy spluttered; but, obeying the authoritative

sweep of Amanda's hand, she entered her room and Amanda shut the door on her.

She was crossing the corridor to her own room when she heard her name gently called in Poole's voice.

"Amanda! I wish to speak with you. Will you come down a minute?"

"Certainly," said Amanda, and returned with her air of sedate graciousness to the morning-room, took a chair there, and lay back in it in a pose of elegant ease.

"You have not had time to read my letter, I'm afraid?" she said politely.

It had been a long and carefully written one, entering in detail, profoundly interesting from Amanda's point of view, into the history of his engagement: Poole's eager pursuit of her, the liberal demonstration he had made of his admiration for her, and his open desire to have her for his own; the degrees of change in his demeanour from the day she had consented to his prayer. She had, in truth, suffered a good deal since that day, although she had jealously contrived to conceal what she had felt; there had been a kind of solace in setting it all forth; it was due to her that he should be made at last to understand.

"There is no need to read it—thanks," he said smoothly. "I quickly gathered the gist of it. Here it is."

"You are right. Explanations are superfluous," she said. She took the letter from him, flung it, and the ring it contained, in the fire. Through much study in the days when the subject was of importance

to her she knew Aubrey Poole well. His elaborately indifferent attitude, the soft smoothness of his tone did not conceal from her the fact that she had wounded him, that he was angry. Her spirit rose; she found her own part easier to play.

"You have decided—rather late in the day—to free us both from ties which have begun to gall," he said. "I make no complaint, of course; and only wish to ask you why you could not have lessened the disagreeables of the situation by making known your decision earlier?"

"It seemed to me, at the last, desirable to wait," she explained. "Such a rupture, roughly made, is perhaps unpleasant. And, Aubrey,"—here she smiled upon him,—“you have not been inconvenienced greatly, I think, by your chains. All along you knew how to wear them very lightly.”

He waved a hand. "We need not go into it all, as it is over," he said. "We will spare ourselves the vulgar satisfaction of recriminations, Amanda. You have done your best to make me look a fool. I am glad to think you have not quite succeeded." Then he put out his hand. "Good-bye," he said.

"You are not going, surely?"

"I am going, with your permission, at once."

She gave him her hand. It was to her almost incredible that she felt nothing in that parting.

"And Daisy?" she asked him. For why should she spare him?

He only looked at her blankly.

"You surely have not forgotten Daisy already, Aubrey? 'The child'? 'Baby,' you remember?"

"I leave Daisy in excellent hands," he said equably.

"You and your ally, the little shop-keeping parson, will be able to protect Daisy—even from me."

Her anger against him was only latent, after all, perhaps; a spark of hatred looked out at him from the eyes which had been used to regard him with admiration and love, but she carefully kept her voice under control.

"I wonder why you speak of a man so infinitely your superior with contempt?" she asked.

"I always knew you had a weakness in that direction," he said, and laughed. It was to provoke him to anger, merely; he did not believe it for a minute. It was not possible that the order of woman who had once appreciated himself could find Fisher attractive. She detected his malice.

"You are right," she said with perfect temper. "I have always admired him greatly."

"And he has not returned the compliment? But now that you are at liberty to confess your devotion he will soften, perhaps?"

"Oh dear, no! He has known since quite a long time that I was going to break off with you. It had no effect."

"He is so much in love?"

"So deeply, deeply in love!"

"How very interesting!" he said. He went to the piano, took from it a couple of songs he had sung the night before, and rolled them carefully together. "He insulted me, once,—that miserable beggar," he said. "I don't forget it." Then he walked with the songs to the door.

"Why need you go, Aubrey?" she asked him. "Do a perfectly easy thing in such a violent way?"

He came back to her with a stride. "Do you think you have treated me well?" he asked her.

She looked at him with cool indifference. "Rather well—all things considered."

He bent and thrust an angry face into hers. "Then, I tell you you have treated me damned badly," he said, and turned on his heel and went.

To explain their visitor's abrupt departure, Amanda was obliged to take her father to a certain extent into her confidence. "It is not only that, considered gravely in the light of a husband, he is impossible," she said; "a drawback I might have felt compelled to overlook. But also he is not a gentleman—and with that it is impossible for me to put up."

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### DAISY HEARS HER BANNIS

AMANDA had found it impossible to maintain her self-respect and to allow Aubrey Poole to consider himself any longer bound to her, but she had not expected him to make an open rupture. Always he had considered what was agreeable to himself before what was dignified, and she had been sure he would still wish to dangle at the strings of Daisy's pinafore. And then, time and opportunity secured, who could tell what might not have been the issue?

Yet he was not entirely without a sense of decency and pride, of a sort. She, unexpectedly to herself, had managed to wound him; and here he was, gone at a moment's notice. And here was Daisy, at whom she would so gladly never have looked again, indefinitely on her hands. Things had not turned out at all as Amanda had desired.

Daisy, in the first hours of finding herself bereft of her playmate and admirer, alternately cried and sulked. Once again, before she went to bed on the first night of Poole's departure, she repeated to Amanda, knuckles in eyes, the request that Harold Fisher might not be told of what had taken place. To this Amanda gave a conditional promise.



"I won't tell him, if you do," she said. "But either you or I tell him. Do you suppose I shall let that good man marry you without knowing what an untrustworthy girl you are? Everyone else in the world knows it but he; and he is too good to suspect. Now he shall know. One of us tells him as soon as he comes home. It had better be you."

So Daisy gave up crying, but she kept out of Amanda's way as much as possible, shutting herself up in her room until she heard the General's voice; when she would run down, would feel, at his request, in his pockets for the sweets he brought her, would help him to put away his golf clubs, and listen to the events of the day on the links, until he fell into the before-dinner nap over the fire which he struggled against, but into which he was always ensnared. At dinner, when the girl's beauty always seemed to strike him afresh, he was kept in constant good-nature by her presence. Amanda was angrily amused to see that, Poole being gone, the white kitten became almost as entertaining an object to her father as to him. He was made to nurse it; to shake hands with it. Amanda even detected in him an intention to crawl under the table for it when it escaped from Daisy's lap. Happening to catch his daughter's eye, however, he forbore.

"What fools men are!" Amanda said to herself, bitterly marvelling at the susceptibility of the sex.

Finally, the General must take Daisy Meers to the links to practise putting. All Wynborough talked of her appearance there with him; and Mrs. Algum declared that by inviting the girl to her house Amanda Chatterhouse had put the other ladies of

the town and College in an uncomfortable position, and had committed a breach of good faith.

Amanda, caring little for the ladies of the College and town, was yet heartily sick of the situation. During the few days of Poole's stay a sort of excitement had upheld her; the forlorn hope that matters might, she did not exactly define to herself how, right themselves; that the marriage of Daisy Meers to the man Amanda Chatterhouse greatly desired to marry herself, might be prevented. But Poole gone, the vague hope dissipated by his departure, the presence of Harold Fisher's betrothed wife was irksome and embittering in the extreme. Each day showed Amanda more certainly how unfit was the girl he had been quixotic enough to promise to marry to be the rector's wife; each day brought nearer the inevitable one when the marriage must take place.

Presently a letter came from Ursula at Bournemouth, where the Fisher family were staying, to Amanda.

"My father cannot settle here," she wrote. "He has lived too long in Wynborough to care for any other place. He is unhappy there now, poor man, but here he is more unhappy still. He insists on going back when my brother leaves, so I have begged of Harry to stay a little longer. He hopes you all like his substitute at St. Luke's? On Sunday those terrible banns are to be published for the first time. No wonder we are all unhappy! I sometimes feel as if my heart would break to think of it. Was there ever on earth a man so obstinate? He is ruining all his life with his eyes open, who can say for what

reason? He looks ill, himself, and as wretched as the rest of us. Forgive my troubling you, dear Miss Chatterhouse, with these family affairs. You have always been so kind to me! I cannot speak to my poor old father or to Harry of what I feel. It is a relief to have written it.

"We expect to come home at the end of next week, and then, dear Miss Chatterhouse, with our grateful thanks to you for your goodness, my father and I will relieve you of Daisy Meers."

"Have you written to tell Mr. Fisher about what took place here with Mr. Poole?" Amanda demanded of her visitor, looking up with hard eyes from the perusal of this letter.

Daisy gazed at her questioner without speaking, in the way habitual to her when she did not choose to make admissions, and there was no good in telling lies.

"You will have to do it, you know," Amanda persisted, looking at the girl with irrepressible, grudging dislike.

Poor Ursula! Poor old father! Poor, poor Harry! who was grand enough, and maddening enough, to ruin himself and break the hearts of everyone belonging to him—from what? From tenderness to what he believed to be outcast and maligned; from a sense of duty, honest, however mistaken; from a defiance of social laws he hated, made by people he despised.

Amanda saw his white face of wretchedness and the woe pictured in his eyes. With the sweet unwisdom of love, although with her whole heart she condemned his action, with her whole heart she admired him for it, and knew that if he had not been

so unreasoning foolish he would not have seemed to her half so dear.

Not for an instant did she expect to get the girl to confess to those embraces by the piano.—To how many such embraces, from how many people, would she have had to confess?—She knew quite well she would not, herself, tell the story; yet, being human, could not resist the pleasure of making Daisy uncomfortable about the matter.

Miss Chatterhouse did not go to St. Luke's to hear the publishing of the rector's banns, but Daisy went. Amanda had advised her to forego this pleasure, but the General was as usual on Daisy's side.

"If the child wishes to hear her banns, why on earth shouldn't she?" he asked.

So, one of the Wilderness servants was told off to accompany the young lady, who must by no means be trusted out alone; and the bride elect stood up smiling, in the Chatterhouse pew, every eye within range of vision upon her. She was not at all abashed by so much attention, but turned her head frequently to give those behind her a coveted view of her face.

Instead of returning by the way she had come, Daisy must give her escort the slip and make a wide detour. To do this she must turn from the High Street into a steep and narrow lane, running at right angles with it; where, on one side, set in high stone walls, were the back doors of detached gardens, and on the other some of the oldest and largest, but now cheapest-rented, houses of Wynborough.

At one of these Aubrey Poole had lodged for a time when he had left Jasmine House and was tired of the restraint of the Wilderness. Before a window

on a level with her head on the ground floor of this house Daisy stopped, and presently she gave a single tap with the silver-bound corner of her prayer-book upon the pane.

The window was thrown open and the dark head and face of Mr. Poole appeared.

"Hallo!" he said.

"Hallo!" said Daisy.

"What are you up to, Baby?"

"I wondered if you were there."

"All alone, Baby?"

"Yes. I've been to church. My banns were cried."

"Really! Poor Baby!"

He leant his arms on the window-sill and stared, as if he had not seen it before, at the showy beauty of the girl. At her hair that "answered the sun," at the darkness of her eyes, the pink-and-white of her round young face, at the play of her dimples when she smiled.

"Baby!"

"Yes, Mr. Poole."

"I have something to say to you."

"Have you?"

"Don't you want to hear it?"

"Yes, Mr. Poole."

"Come in, then, Baby, and I will tell it you."

He went from the window, and reappeared presently at the door at the top of the four railed steps. How handsome he looked to Daisy, standing there in his loosely fashioned clothes, his red silk handkerchief tied about his collarless neck. She mounted the steps and went in.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### DAISY AND AUBREY POOLE

**A**FTER that Sunday when the banns of Harold Fisher, bachelor, and of Daisy Meers, spinster, both of this parish, had been published at St. Luke's, the mood of Amanda Chatterhouse, always subject to variableness, changed, and with it her demeanour to her guest. The marriage was inevitable; not for Daisy's sake, but for Harold Fisher's it was desirable to make the best of her.

She braced herself to the effort, therefore, and conscientiously endeavoured in the short time which remained to her to take the future Mrs. Fisher's social education in hand. The fact of the breaking off of her own engagement was public property, and all her dear friends of the neighbourhood came to see how she demeaned herself under the blow. Mrs. Algum was the first of these, and Daisy was present through the visit. She was present in a new blouse Amanda had given her, her hair neatly arranged; but those graces which she might have displayed no opportunity was given her to exhibit. For Mrs. Algum, who never deviated from the line of behaviour she saw fit to adopt, persistently ignored the girl; and all Amanda's efforts to drag the silent third into the talk were in vain.

With an eloquent pressure of the hand, and an invitation not to be withstood in her speaking eyes, Mrs. Algum, departing, drew Amanda into the hall with her.

"Why have you brought this unpleasantness upon yourself, and made matters more difficult for us?" she asked.

"It's a bad business," Amanda explained wearily. "I wished to make the best instead of the worst of it."

"But excuse me, dear Amanda, you are making the worst for all of us."

It had not been of them, exactly, Amanda had thought, but she did not trouble to say so.

"The thing for us to do is to let Mr. Fisher see his position is not tenable. I have said it all along. He will find it impossible to live here with a wife who is not received. Let him exchange livings with someone——"

"But how about the parishioners of 'someone'?" Amanda asked; and brought upon herself the explanation that there were people of all kinds in the world, and that in some neighbourhoods whole parishes were composed of quite the common class.

"Let him choose such a one, and take this young person, and go there."

When Amanda went back into the drawing-room she found the door ajar, and Daisy standing with it in her hand.

"I heard what you were both saying," she said, looking with a kind of sheepish daring at Amanda. "I hate old Mrs. Algum. Whatever she had said to

me I wouldn't have answered. She wouldn't have got anything out of me."

"You've nothing to regret, then," Amanda said, and walked past her into the room.

"I know why you all hate me so," Daisy went on. She rattled the handle of the door and wriggled on her feet as she spoke; but there was more expression than usual in her great eyes, and it was evident she spoke with rancour.

Amanda laughed. "Keep it to yourself then, my dear girl," she advised. "People do hate each other a good deal. So long as no one explains or complains it doesn't matter. Shut the door and come to the fire."

"You hate me," Daisy persisted, keeping her place, "because I'm prettier than the rest of you; and because Harold is going to marry me, and put me at the head of you all. And you'll all have to look up to me."

Amanda laughed again. "Do you suppose I am going to look up to you, my poor girl?" she inquired.

"Yes, I do," Daisy declared. "I know you'll have to do it."

"Mr. Fisher comes home to-morrow. Have you told him yet how you and Mr. Poole played the 'March of the Troubadours'?"

"No, I haven't," said Daisy; "and I'm not going to."

Then she went out and banged the door.

The rector had persuaded his father and sister to take up their abode at the Rectory for the first days of their return. He knew that the loss of his wife



would come upon the old man with a fresh grief at his home-coming, and he thought to be actually beneath the Rectory roof, and among the chairs and tables which he had bought with such pride and thought of with so much satisfaction, would divert him from his grief.

Since the quarrel with Harold his father clung to him in a fashion pathetic to see. Not talking to him very much, silent now about the College bills, the cost of the living, and all that had been done for the only son, but silent also on his shortcomings; saying no word of reproach or expostulation, but following the young man when he moved from his side with such an expression as his eyes might have worn if he had known the loved object was condemned, beyond hope of respite, to die.

They got back to Wynborough on the Saturday, by the afternoon train. During their absence the name of Daisy Meers had not been once mentioned among them; but it seemed to two of the three that her shadow fell on them as they entered the Rectory doors. A constraint was present among them; and father and sister watched the son and brother with jealous, wistful eyes. What was he thinking about Daisy? Was he anxious to get away to see her? Did he intend at once to bring her home?

The three had tea together in the study. Old Mr. Fisher had a mania for reading letters—anyone's letters, by permission or not, begging letters, prospectuses, advertisements—anything that came by post. Harold knew the weakness, and passed him an accumulation of communications to open and read.

"Throw your eye over these, father, and let me

know if there is anything which needs my attention," he said.

Conscientiously Mr. Fisher obeyed, and busied himself with the papers over his tea and toast, his troubles for the time forgotten. Some he offered to answer for his son.

"Not of much importance, but more courteous to send a line in reply. After all, 'Arold, a penny stamp and a 'a'p'orth of notepaper—what is it?"

"You could help me much in that way, if you would, father," Harold told him.

Remorse for the disappointment he was causing had made him very tender over his father. He had come out of his long reserve and talked about himself; his life at school, at College, experiences of his later career. Things which he had thought too trivial to relate, or had refrained from telling, doubting his father's discretion, he told him now.

And of the old days at the shop he encouraged his father to talk; of the early struggling days of his married life; of all the little foolish nothings which the past makes so sacred. Sayings and doings of this person and that, long dead, which, stored in the memory for a lifetime, rise to the lips so naturally in age; stories of those old days of which youth is so impatient. Names fell glibly from his lips of people so obscure in their lives, so long in their graves, that perhaps when the voice which now uttered them was silent they would never be heard on earth again.

Ursula was a little inclined to snub her father when such fatiguing old odds and ends from a retentive memory were poured forth; but her brother listened, even eagerly now, and with a respectful ear.

So, thus tactfully put at his ease, old Fisher sat over the fire in his son's chair, and looked through the rector's correspondence, placed with his teacup on the table at his elbow. So engaged, something of his self-gratulatory condition of mind presently returned to him.

Full well he remembered being shown into that very room twenty years ago to measure it for a new carpet. He thought of the occasion now, and looked up from a circular, offering bicycles on special terms to clergymen of the Church of England who could not be expected to pay for them in the usual way, to see his old self going about on the floor on all fours, a foot-rule in his hand. The old rector had been very affable, and had asked him to take a glass of wine, he remembered. He had stood over there, against the door, closing his foot-rule, as he made his best bow and declined.

Dear me! Times had altered since then! And yet, then he had had a good wife to go home to, to tell what a good order he had taken, and how condescending the old rector had been, and was very happy.

His eyes were so used to tears of late they filled easily, and he returned to the circular, seeing it through a mist.

Here was another letter coming in; brought by a maid on a salver. The rector did not pass this letter on to his father, and Ursula saw it was in the handwriting of Amanda.

"The messenger said he was to wait for an answer, sir."

The rector looked up from the note, his brows knit

as if with the effort to make himself understand what the servant had said.

"Say I will bring the answer," he told her slowly, and went back to the note. But when the housemaid had disappeared he followed her into the hall.

"Has anyone called to see me to-day, Frances?"

Frances enumerated the names of one or two parishioners who had called to inquire at what hour the rector would return, who were coming in again in the evening.

Harold folded the note and slipped it in his pocket. "Miss Meers has not been here?"

"No, sir."

"You are sure?"

"Quite sure, sir. Cook and me was saying to-day we hadn't as much as set eyes on Miss Daisy since we seen her at church, Sunday."

"If she should come in while I'm away, tell her to wait here for me, please."

Without returning to speak to his father and sister he put on his hat and walked up to the Wilderness. Amanda met him in the hall.

"She is not with us," he said.

With that in their eyes it would be hard to analyse they gazed in each other's faces.

"Come in here," Amanda said.

She led the way into that large and pleasant morning-room where Daisy had practised the "March of the Troubadours."

"I have not allowed her to walk about alone," Amanda said,—there was no one to hear if she shouted, but she spoke almost in a whisper,—“but this morning she started before I could be ready to

go with her. She told me you had asked her to be at the Rectory at ten o'clock. I only heard, by accident, just now, you were not expected back till four. I sent to you at once."

"I did not write to tell her to be at the Rectory at ten, or at any time."

"I have questioned the maid I sent with her. She tells me Daisy did not go so far as St. Luke's. Only to Manton's in the High Street. She sent Harriet home from there. Harriet ought, of course, to have told me, but did not till now."

"Where is Daisy?" he asked.

She shook her head and looked away. She knew very well the thought that was in her heart; it would not do to let him read it in her eyes.

"Can you guess where she is?"

She was silent.

"You must tell me."

"It is just possible she may have gone to the links with my father. He is fond of her; they have been much together. It is possible; but——"

"But you do not think she is there?"

She did not reply.

"She left you at ten. It is now six. Inquiries must be made. You must tell me everything that is in your mind."

"I have been a bad shepherd of the sheep," Amanda said. She turned her face from him, her voice wavered. "Aubrey Poole has been here," she whispered.

"Poole!" He looked sharply at her as he repeated the name. "I thought that you and he——?"

"We have parted," she said. "He came before he

knew. I did not tell him quite at once. He was here for four days—with her—before I told him."

She felt condemning eyes upon her. "And yet you knew——?"

She turned quickly upon him and lifted her head. "I knew," she said, "—that was why. I knew that neither he nor she could be faithful. That was why."

He looked at her in silence; then walked from her to the window and stood there, his back turned to her, looking out upon the garden in the waning light.

"You think me very wicked?" she asked him.

"I think you should have saved them from themselves and each other."

"And I did not think so. My thought was to try to save you."

He stood with a hand clasping a wrist at his back in a long silence.

"Once before she escaped and came back to me," he said, as if to himself. "She will come back to me again."

Amanda looked at his back with impatient scorn. What hope was there for such a man as this!

"She is, after all, perhaps, amusing herself on the links with my father."

"What time will he be back?"

"Hark! He is back now. I hear his voice in the hall."

She went to the door and gently opened it.

"Daisy!" they heard the General call. "Come down, child. Come and see what I've got for you. What are you hiding for? Come along."

Amanda, holding the door, looked at the rector, who had joined her there. There was no need for speech.

The General had mounted the first half-dozen stairs. "Daisy!" he called again, in a coaxing whisper, as if he had been enticing a baby. "Come and see what's in my coat pocket for Daisy!"

Amanda softly closed the door. She looked with a glance of malice in her eyes at her companion's face. "Another victim, you see," she said.

He seemed not to hear. "I shall have to find her," he said.

Amanda left him, and went back into the room. "If you think her worth finding," she said over her shoulder.

"You can give me no clue? Make no suggestion?"

"Oh, dear me—plenty!" Amanda said bitterly. "She is gone to Aubrey Poole; or to some other man—or boy. For, besides being without even the rudiments of principle, Daisy Meers is an abject fool, you know. Yet search the world for her—find her by any means——!"

She stopped in the midst of the sentence, hearing the door close. The rector had gone.

She listened to his step in the hall, to the opening and shutting of the hall-door.

A minute later and the hall-door was thrown open again; and again there was the sound of a step, hurried now; and again Amanda found the rector standing beside her. In his hand was a telegram.

"I met the messenger in the garden," he said. "I have come back to see if it brings us news."

Amanda tore open the envelope.

With their two heads bent above the flimsy sheet they read the words at a glance ; then turned and looked in each other's faces.

The General came in, still prosecuting his search. "What has become of little Daisy?" he began, but stopped short on seeing the rector with his daughter, the orange coloured sheet of the telegram held between them.

Amanda, without a word, passed him the message. He read it aloud—

"Married to-day at St. Anne's Church, Cambridge.  
"DAISY AND AUBREY POOLE."

"Married," repeated the General; his mouth fell open ; he put his hand into the pocket of his Norfolk jacket, where reposed a little parcel containing an amethyst and pearl pendant Daisy had admired in the jeweller's window in the High Street. "Sly little cat!" the General said.

"Married!" whispered Amanda, seized by a late compunction. "Married! Oh, poor, poor Aubrey!"

"Married!" the rector echoed. "Now God grant it is not a lie!"



## CHAPTER XXX

### ALL RIGHT

ONCE, in quite the beginning of their closer acquaintance, the rector of St. Luke's had disturbed Miss Chatterhouse lying flat on her back on a cushionless sofa in a position she believed to be conducive to the maintenance of her perfect figure. She had not been very happy on that day; she was not very happy now; but to grow crooked or narrow-chested would not make things more cheerful for her, as she was level-headed enough to know.

Then, she had tried to make herself believe that Aubrey Poole loved her, and in her love and her pride had suffered tortures, knowing all the time he did not. Now, as she stretched her long length on the hard plank, her elbows down at her sides, the tips of her fingers touching across her breast, she repeatedly told herself that in believing the same thing of Harold Fisher she had been equally deceived.

Why, else, had he left her on the night they had heard of Daisy Meers' marriage without a word? All Sunday had passed since then; Monday had passed; here was Monday after dinner, and still he had not come.

She had stayed at home all day on the chance of his appearance; had worked all the morning in the

garden, trying so to forget how emptily the hours dragged ; in the afternoon had lavishly decorated the house with flowers to do honour to him who surely must come at last. All day she had worn her prettiest things. For dinner, although hope was beginning to die within her, she had taken extra pains to be perfect, and had put on her most becoming dress.

The General, since the departure of Daisy, had returned to the safer attractions of bridge, and had gone, after dinner, to his Club. Amanda was alone, therefore, disappointed, heart-sick.

Yesterday, in the evening, she had gone to church. She had shrunk at first from showing herself there. "We shall be thought both to have been jilted," she thought. "People will be staring at him and at me." Yet a force stronger than her own will drew her in the end to her pew.

She was aware when she first went in that the church was crowded. Since the quite first days of his ministry the rector had not looked down on such a congregation. They had come through curiosity, in that early time, to stare at him, to criticise him, to find food for gossip. They came, Amanda knew, for a like reason now. To see how he demeaned himself under the humiliation that had befallen him. To see how a man who had lost, through treachery and deceit, the woman he was going to make his wife could face the two or three hundred men and women, knowing all his history, and preach to them as if nothing had happened. To compare notes afterwards as to how often his eyelids had quivered or his voice wavered, to speak of his paleness and worn looks.

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"Is that why you have been so long in coming?" Amanda asked.

"That is why," he said. "I wronged him. I was haunted by a horrible doubt. I dared not believe. I had to make sure. It is all right."

Then he put out both his hands and gripped hers that were lying on the cushion on either side of her as she sat.

"It is all right, Amanda?" he said.

"I am almost as thankful for the joy this will be to my poor old father as for my own happiness," he told her, later on. "That you are to be my wife, Amanda, will be the crowning triumph of his life."

"Then let me go, myself, to tell him," she said. And would not be denied; but put a long light evening coat over her pale-hued dress, and wound a white filmy scarf about her head and throat, and so attired went forth into the chill of the early spring night. And all the stars of heaven had come out to shine for her and him, and all the influences of the night were kind. Amanda walked down the steep slope of the badly lit road and into the more brilliantly lit High Street beside her lover with a gait as proud, and a heart as high, as if she had walked beside a king.

"How long?" she asked, putting the first one of the unfailing pair of questions doing duty on such occasions since the days of speech. "How long?" "How much?"

It had been from the first, of course; when is there any other answer to be made by a true lover? From the first time he had seen her.

And when was that?

He knew, as it happened, to the day and the hour. It had been at noon on the first day of his first Long Vacation. His father, who made a sort of show of him at that time, he explained without resentment, had called him into the shop to exhibit him to a customer who took, or was supposed to take, an interest in his career. And General Chatterhouse had ridden up to the shop door—it was before the days of golf mania, he had been often in the saddle, then—his daughter on a pony beside him.

"Your hair was loose in those days," Harold said, looking at the hair beneath the gauzy silk with a smile. "Some of it was blown up about your cap, I remember!"

"Was I so very charming? I remember I thought I was." She gave him her swift, sidelong glance from the lowered lids. Her face was lovely to-night in the light of the gas-lamps beneath which they walked, its delicate contour, exquisitely fair and youthful, blooming with happiness, set in the soft swathing of the silken scarf. "Was I charming, Harry?"

"Ah!" Harry said. "My father went quickly out to you—he used to bow as he went down the steps to his carriage customers, to bow and rub his hands—you gave your order in a quick, haughty little voice—by the way, that pretty languor of yours is acquired since that day—and trotted off."

"And I never saw you? Oh, Harry!"

"I was ashamed of the shop in those days, I am now ashamed to remember. I would not have had you see me there for the world; but I thought I could have looked at you for ever."

"Let us go to Regent House—yes, Harry; I will buy a yard of ribbon—and you can show me just where you stood when I never—little wretch that I was!—looked at you. And you shall stand there again and look at me and say to yourself—oh, you can say to yourself beautiful things, and all—all will be true! Let us go."

But at Regent House, as they might have remembered, all was in darkness; and the shutters were up before the door at which the young man had stood.

A lamp was suspended above the Rectory door. All the wide front of the house was visible in its light. Amanda stood and looked it over with a smile. When he had opened the door he put out both hands and drew her over the step to him as he stood within the hall.

"This is home," he said.

"Ah," said Amanda. "How glad I am to come there, to rest."

In the study Ursula and her father were sitting. The old man at his son's writing-table, busily penning replies to some letters which Ursula had not been able to prevent him from opening in Harold's absence.

"'Arold has no secrets from me," he said. "And there might be something of importance."

"Where is the use of your writing letters which probably Harold will not send?" she had asked him in her irritatingly practical way. And—

"Don't you suppose that I, as a business man, know how to answer business letters?" the old man had impatiently asked in reply.

"I know you have no business with Harry's letters," she had persisted, lifting her face from the sock she was knitting for the rector.

In the little home of which she had once thought, shared with the bank clerk, and brightened perhaps by his children, she would have been a useful and a lovable woman. Robbed of this, Ursula would have much ado not to grow into a fretful and peevish one.

"Let me alone, will you? I forbid you to interfere with me, Ursula!" the father cried.

Ursula sat upright with a listening look on her face. "Hark! There is Harry!" she said.

"Stuff and nonsense!" said Mr. Fisher. "There isn't a train by which he could possibly come at this time of night."

Then the door opened, and not Harry but an elegant young woman in a sea-blue evening dress came in.

The rector had, himself, unwound the gauzy scarf from her pretty hair in the hall, and, desirous that his people should behold this delightful vision in all its unshrouded charm, had taken off the silk-lined coat.

Ursula looked with astonished eyes. For the minute she did not recognise the radiant Amanda, the lace sleeves of her dress falling away from her white arms, the jewelled pendant at the base of her long, delicately rounded throat. When she did recognise her, she could not imagine an explanation of her presence there at that hour, and so was afraid to trust her senses.

Amanda trailed the shimmering, sea-blue, sea-green draperies across to the rector's sister, took her hands,

from which the knitting had fallen, and kissed her cheek.

"Dear Ursula," she said, "Harry and I—where is he? He is hanging up my coat in the hall—have brought you some news. I hope you will think it good news, and be glad."

"Oh, Miss Chatterhouse! Oh, Amanda!" Ursula said. Then, because the news did indeed seem very good to her, and because to weep now came more naturally to her than to laugh, she began to cry.

Harold, coming in, went to his father, now standing up, one trembling hand upon the writing-table, the other raking the iron-grey meshes of his beard. In his eyes, as he looked at the charming figure of Miss General Chatterhouse, was a dazed expression.

"Father," Harold said, "this is Miss Chatterhouse, you know." He held out his hand to her, and Amanda swept across the room and put her own hand within it. "I have been telling her about old days, father; about how hard you worked, and how self-sacrificingly you and my mother and Ursula lived—and all for me. And she insisted on coming down to-night to thank you for it. For she is going to be my wife."

FINIS

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